



# Be Not Afraid of Life

In the  
Words of  
William  
James

Edited by

JOHN  
KAAG

and

JONATHAN  
VAN BELLE



Jill Goldman Photography

John Kaag



Zuriel van Belle and Chris Crafty

Jonathan van Belle

## BE NOT AFRAID OF LIFE

John Kaag is the Donohue Professor of Ethics and the Arts at UMass Lowell, External Professor at the Santa Fe Institute, and the author of *Sick Souls, Healthy Minds: How William James Can Save Your Life* (Princeton), *American Philosophy: A Love Story*, and *Hiking with Nietzsche: On Becoming Who You Are*.

Jonathan van Belle is an independent scholar and former philosophy editor at Outlier.org.

Kaag and van Belle are also the authors of *Henry at Work: Thoreau on Making a Living* (Princeton).

Praise for *Sick Souls, Healthy Minds:*  
*How William James Can Save Your Life*

“An excellent introduction to William James and his philosophy. It is timely, too, given the state of the world as it plunges towards hell in a handcart. Help, even if not of the life-saving kind, is available.”

—John Banville, *Literary Review*

“Characteristically elegant. . . . I’m another reader who has felt at least temporarily saved and encouraged by James, so of course I’d advise you to read Kaag’s primer. . . . But if you haven’t read James himself . . . he remains ready to help you directly.”

—John Williams, *New York Times Book Review*

Be Not Afraid of Life



# Be Not Afraid of Life

In the Words of  
William James



*Edited by John Kaag  
and Jonathan van Belle*

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS  
PRINCETON AND OXFORD

Copyright © 2023 by John Kaag and Jonathan van Belle

Princeton University Press is committed to the protection of copyright and the intellectual property our authors entrust to us. Copyright promotes the progress and integrity of knowledge. Thank you for supporting free speech and the global exchange of ideas by purchasing an authorized edition of this book. If you wish to reproduce or distribute any part of it in any form, please obtain permission.

Requests for permission to reproduce material from this work should be sent to [permissions@press.princeton.edu](mailto:permissions@press.princeton.edu)

Published by Princeton University Press  
41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540  
99 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 6JX

[press.princeton.edu](http://press.princeton.edu)

All Rights Reserved

ISBN 9780691240152  
ISBN (e-book) 9780691229577

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available

Editorial: Rob Tempio & Chloe Coy  
Production Editorial: Ali Parrington  
Production: Erin Suydam  
Publicity: Maria Whelan & Carmen Jimenez  
Copyeditor: Jodi Beder

Cover image: *William James*. Notman Studio, photographer.  
Photograph, undated. MS Am 2955 (63) Purchase, Amy Lowell Trust.  
Louis J. Appell Jr. Fund for British Civilization in the Harvard College  
Library; James Duncan Phillips fund; and the Charles Warren fund.

This book has been composed in Sabon LT Pro

Printed on acid-free paper. ∞

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my wife, Kathleen, and our children, Becca and Henry  
—John Kaag

To Zuriel, in fervent osculation  
—Jonathan van Belle



Be not afraid of life.  
Believe that life is worth living,  
and your belief will help create the fact . . .

—William James



# Contents

## Introduction 1

### DETERMINISM AND DESPAIR

- 1 Letter to Thomas Wren Ward (1868) 25
- 2 “The Sick Soul,” from *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) 35
- 3 “The Dilemma of Determinism” (1897) 53

### FREEDOM AND LIFE

- 4 “The Will to Believe” (1897) 77
- 5 “Is Life Worth Living?” (1897) 110

### PSYCHOLOGY AND THE HEALTHY MIND

- 6 “What Makes a Life Significant” (1900) 141
- 7 Chapter IX, “The Stream of Thought,” and Chapter X, “The Consciousness of Self,” from *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) 160
- 8 “The Energies of Men” (1907) 208

CONSCIOUSNESS AND TRANSCENDENCE

- 9 A Review of Benjamin Paul Blood's  
*The Anesthetic Revelation and the Gist  
of Philosophy* (1874) 235
- 10 "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings"  
(1899) 242

TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES

- 11 "What Pragmatism Means" (1903) 265
- 12 "The Moral Equivalent of War" (1903) 282

WONDER AND HOPE

- 13 "Mysticism," from *The Varieties of Religious  
Experience* (1902) 301
- 14 "Human Immortality: Two Supposed  
Objections to the Doctrine" (1897) 326
- 15 "A Pluralistic Mystic" (1910) 338

*Index* 369

Be Not Afraid of Life



# Introduction

PHILOSOPHY IS USUALLY REGARDED as the most inessential and superfluous of human pursuits—right up until the point when a person suddenly realizes that it's not. Philosophy might begin in wonder, as the ancients suggested, but it is also born of struggles, both personal and political, that shake average men and women to the bone. In these moments of crisis—in the face of suffering, injustice, and death—one may begin to ask a question that has always been and will always be at the heart of philosophy: “Is life, this life, *my* life, the life that frightens me to the core, worth living?” No thoughtless answer will suffice. Only a wise one will do. And with the asking of this question, all of a sudden the love of wisdom takes on a life-and-death significance. We would like to make sense of things, to understand what they mean, to be less afraid.

On a steamy evening in 1895, William James, founder of pragmatism and empirical psychology in the United States, addressed an audience of young men and women at Holden Chapel, tucked away in a corner of Harvard Yard. At the end of his lecture on the meaning of life, he raised his voice: “Be not afraid

of life. Believe that life is worth living, and your belief will help create the fact.” This is not the command of a fearless God that echoes throughout the Bible—“Be not afraid!”—but rather the words of a man who was often debilitated by fear. For some of us, fear is a frequent state—not the fear of any particular object, like monsters or venomous spiders, but of life generally. The universe simply does not sit well with us. It is what the Germans would call *Unheimlichkeit*, literally, “unhomeliness,” which is somewhere between uncanny and terrifying. As a young man, James experienced his reality in precisely this way. In later life, as a philosopher and psychologist, James described his condition as being “sick-souled” and crafted an astonishingly detailed course of treatment.

William James wrote as though his life depended on it, because in a significant respect he believed it did. The entirety of his productive life can be understood as a complex response to the question of meaning, as expressed by a man who was not always convinced of life’s value or desirability. Countless readers—from Jane Addams, who founded Hull House, to Jean-Paul Sartre, who founded atheistic existentialism, to Bill Wilson, who founded Alcoholics Anonymous—have turned to James for insight and perspective when they could see no way forward.

Readers are drawn to James's sense that a significant aspect of living out philosophy is to cultivate the resources to be just a little less afraid of life.



Over the years, the editors of the anthology in your hands have read and reread particular passages from James's corpus. In moments of difficulty, both small and momentous, James has helped us understand the perplexities and tragedies of life with greater clarity; but more importantly, his words have provided a wise companion, a Virgil-like guide to help us walk through our own little rings of hell. James is perfectly clear: life is often scary. There's nothing to be ashamed of in this admission. It is a shame only if we never try to chip away at that fear.

This anthology is meant to serve as a companion to Kaag's *Sick Souls, Healthy Minds: How William James Can Save Your Life* and consists in the main of James's published writings that underpinned the book. When John Williams reviewed *Sick Souls, Healthy Minds* in *The New York Times*, he wrote, "I'd advise you to read Kaag's primer. . . . But if you haven't read James himself, do that first. It's wonderful that he inspires intermediaries to bring his thought to modern-day readers, but his cogent and humane

work doesn't strictly need intermediaries. He remains ready to help you directly." Williams's advice is well placed, and this collection is an attempt to provide points of entry into what we take to be the *sanctum sanctorum*, the holy of holies, of James's philosophy; this is an intellectual dwelling built around a single question that James sought to answer in a variety of ways (since it does not admit of a single response): "Is life worth living?" At the doorway of each entry, each selection from James, we have written a short gloss or welcome mat to greet you.

We do not purport to give you all of, or even the best of, James—just the James we know and love. As Richard M. Gale writes, in his introduction to the philosophy of James, "Any interpretation of James that purports to be the correct one thereby shows itself not to be. For James sought a maximally rich and suggestive philosophy, one in which everyone could see themselves reflected." The refraction of James in this anthology is the passional and existential philosopher, one willing to live on a chance, and dare us do likewise.

What do we hope for this collection? When John Banville reviewed *Sick Souls, Healthy Minds*, he reflected that it was too much to expect philosophy to make your life worth living, writing:

To start, let us be clear on one thing: William James cannot save your life. His books, his thought, his dicta are capable of enriching and amplifying the workings of your mind and even of your emotions, if you are suitably receptive. It may even be that the example of how he dealt with his own difficulties may shed a light on how you might deal with your own. But don't count on it and, above all, don't expect too much.

We respectfully disagree with Banville. For those on the edge of total self-destruction, “enriching and amplifying the workings of your mind . . . and your emotions” can and often does have a salvific effect. This is the sense in which philosophy can save you, and it is as real and dramatic as any physical cure.

This anthology has been gathered as an offering for the sick-souled, as an invitation to receive a bit of philosophical therapy from a man who we take to be one of wisest and most generous thinkers of the nineteenth century. James believed that it is possible for the sick soul to be “twice-born”—to face the world meaningfully and courageously. It isn’t easy; it is always the difficult matter of exercising the will, adjusting one’s angle of vision, being open to transcendence, and making way for wonder and hope. But it

is possible. To the question, “Is Life Worth Living?” James assures us, “Maybe. It is up to the liver.”

This anthology has also been gathered for the “healthy-minded,” those who experience the universe as a satisfying and accommodating whole, as a means to understand and aid those—friends, family, neighbors—who teeter on the edge of fatal soulsickness. The United States is currently in the midst of a collective existential crisis, a point in which an unprecedented number of young adults question the meaning of life. Cases of depression, suicide, and para-suicidal behaviors (the slow burn of someone intent on self-destruction) are on the rise. High unemployment, inflation, polarization, and foreign wars have taxed us. The COVID plague passes, but always threatens to return. As Albert Camus, the French existentialist, wrote at the end of *The Plague*:

[T]he plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; . . . it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen chests; . . . it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and . . . perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city.

Camus means something beyond mere bacillus; he means, more deeply, plagues dormant in our minds—

despair sending up malevolence, insecurity sending up violence, hatred sending up cruelty. James, a physiologist turned psychologist-philosopher, similarly used a physiological term, “sickness,” to spotlight all the pathologies below our surfaces, always threatening to overwhelm us.

Banville wrote that *Sick Souls, Healthy Minds* was “timely . . . given the state of the world as it plunges towards hell in a handcart. Help, even if not of the life-saving kind, is available.” This collection is an attempt to provide just a little more help.



As James crested middle age, the emotional malaise that defined his twenties and thirties returned. He sought relief high in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, in a house on the outskirts of the small hamlet of Chocorua, at the edge of the lake, at the base of the mountain that shares its name. In the winter of 1889, James’s sister commented on the importance and meaning of James’s home away from home, writing, “William expressed himself and his environment to perfection when he replied to my question about his house at Chocorua, ‘Oh, it’s the most delightful house you ever saw; has 14 doors all opening outside.’ His brain isn’t limited to 14, perhaps unfortunately.”

It is quite like James, perhaps the most humane and welcoming philosopher, to celebrate a wealth of doors, so many standing invitations for guests to come and go as they like, for light and fresh air to flow freely.

Modeled after James's dwelling in the wilderness, this anthology too has fourteen doors—fourteen selections—to welcome you in, whenever you please. These selections are ordered into six sections of pairwise topics: Determinism and Despair; Freedom and Life; Psychology and the Healthy Mind; Consciousness and Transcendence; Truth and Consequences; and, finally, Wonder and Hope. This structure complements *Sick Souls, Healthy Minds*, though both books, mutually enriching, may stand on their own.

Both books follow a roughly chronological path that tracks James's thinking over the course of more than forty years, and both books open at a moment when James experienced the possibilities of life as entirely closed off. In 1869, James was on the verge of adulthood and, he admitted to his friend Henry Bowditch, on the verge of total collapse: "I am a low-lived wretch," he wrote. "I've been prey to such disgust for life during the past three months as to make letter writing almost an impossibility." At the center of James's troubles was the sense that his life was beyond his ken and beyond his control. He felt, alterna-

tively, that existence was either chaotic and senseless or lockstep and stultifying. In either case, he was not free to chart his own way.

The fact that he was born into a household of affluence and intellectual opportunity was of little help and ultimately only served to deepen James's frustration. In a family of geniuses—his siblings, Henry and Alice, certainly qualified—young William was raised to have great expectations that were routinely unmet. Through his early years James concluded that this existential disappointment stemmed not from a lack of will or understanding, but from the mute indifference of the universe itself. For a time, James felt himself out of sync with the unstoppable workings of the cosmos, and quite literally beside himself. While he eventually quelled this sense of fear and *dis-ease*, James never fully expunged it from his thinking, reflecting on it often, most pointedly in “The Dilemma of Determinism,” his clearest articulation of the experience of being existentially stuck.

To experience the grip of suicidal depression for any length of time is to come into close quarters with what theologians have termed “the religious paradox.” In the late 1880s, Josiah Royce, James’s next-door neighbor and colleague at Harvard, took up the problem directly and undoubtedly affected James’s thinking. The paradox can be summarized in the following

way: Many human beings experience life as completely botched, as a lost cause, as completely unredeemable; these individuals want to be, need to be, saved; yet any form of salvation would turn either on the efforts or the insight of these self-same individuals; and these individuals are devoid of the resources that might make salvation possible because they are completely botched. In short, we must be involved in our own salvation, but we are, by definition, ill-equipped to do so. James was not a religious man in any traditional sense, but he was pointedly aware of this tension because he had experienced it in the depths of despair.

When the black dog of depression darkens our doors, it is not uncommon for us to find the most remote bed or cave or makeshift grave and bury ourselves for weeks. We give ourselves over to the German poet Heinrich Heine's *Matratzengruft*, or "mattress-grave," on which, for eight bed-ridden years, he suffered with crippling paralysis. What would be best for our sanity strikes us as the worst: to get up, when we can, and venture into the light of day. We might be able to rouse ourselves, but only if we had a different body, a different relationship, a different mood, and a different situation—that is to say, only if we were not ourselves. The depressive is usually the person least equipped to diagnose or treat their most serious

ailment. Some sort of astonishing, almost divine, bootstrapping has to occur to save an individual from utter lostness. It is going to be nearly impossible. As it says in Philippians 2:12–13, “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to act for His good pleasure.” James understood this fear and trembling with the clarity of first-hand experience, and fashioned a philosophy of free will that was meant to perform something like a miracle.

Perhaps it was because Charles Bernard Renouvier considered himself a “Swedenborg of history” that James was first drawn to that French philosopher’s writings in the spring of 1870; that “Swedenborg” name was dear to James’s father Henry, thus significant to the son. Whatever the circumstances of this chance encounter, Renouvier likely saved James’s life.

“I think that yesterday was a crisis in my life,” James wrote in his diary on April 30, 1870. “I finished Renouvier’s second *Essais* and see no reason why his definition of free will—‘the sustaining of a thought because I choose to when I might have other thoughts’—need be the definition of an illusion.” Against the prevailing winds of nineteenth-century deterministic philosophers, Renouvier reasserted

metaphysical liberty, declaring that each of us “could break the logical continuity of a mechanical series and be the initial cause of another series of phenomena.” James, taking up Renouvier’s declaration, declared his own new independence: “My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will.”

James’s will, newly freed, could begin the world again, and his life again. His sick soul was now twice-born, though as with most births, nothing’s easy. “This cannot possibly be real. . . . Surely this freedom and joy are at best a fluke. At worst, it is a sure sign that things have gotten worse—that I’m completely delusional.” The fear and trembling, the working out of salvation, grip us again and again; we interpret even our joy as, somehow, its opposite. But Renouvier’s declaration kept James aloft. In the section on “Freedom and Life,” we include the essay “Is Life Worth Living?” We include it because in it you find Renouvier’s liberty distilled into the Jamesian “maybe.” *Maybe* life is worth living; there is a choice about it, every time the question is asked.

Likewise, when it comes to believing a claim on little to no evidence (not, mind you, a claim *counter* to the evidence), yet a claim vital to one’s flourishing, James argues in “The Will to Believe” that there is a chasm requiring a choice: leap across (believe) or

freeze (suspend judgment). Both are choices. In James's oxymoron, this is a "forced option," a forced choice. The belief in free will is just such a forced choice. Philosophically, the case is inconclusive, though the stakes are profound. It is an open question. Over this abyss, Renouvier forced James to choose, asking, "Are you free?" James, frozen for so long, leapt out, sprung forward, and asserted "I am."

After his Renouvier moment in the 1870s, James turned in earnest to his studies, first to human physiology, then to psychology, finally to philosophy and religion. He had discovered his will, and now he was determined to put it to good use. He spent the next decade of his life exploring the relationship between free will, activity, cognition, and emotions. The result of this extensive study was the *Principles of Psychology*, published in 1890, which is widely regarded as the greatest achievement in empirical psychology in the United States in the nineteenth century, and arguably ever. The *Principles* is highly technical, but there are seed grains of humane advice scattered across its pages, signs that James never forgot his dedication to the sick soul or his admiration of the healthy mind.

"Keep the faculty of effort alive in you by a little gratuitous exercise every day," James advised in the *Principles*, "That is, be systematically heroic in little

unnecessary points, do every day or two something for no other reason than its difficulty, so that, when the hour of dire need draws nigh, it may find you not unnerved and untrained to stand the test.” In other words, exercise your will, just as a matter of practice, and note that its effects are real and lasting both on the world and on the bodies we call our own, if only for a short time. To keep the fear of life at bay, James counseled being “systematically heroic,” as a means of fashioning ourselves into a person more equipped to face the chances of life. James continued, “We are spinning our own fates, good or evil, and never to be undone. Every smallest stroke of virtue or of vice leaves its never-so-little scar.” This is about as far as a thinker can get from “The Dilemma of Determinism.”

This being said, James neither overstated what the will could accomplish nor claimed that individuals were the sole authors of their lives. The meaning of life might be “up to the liver,” but this liver is also always constrained and enabled by one’s circumstances. The world frequently intervenes on the will and impresses itself on a human life. The primary selection from the *Principles* on the “Consciousness of the Self” is very clear on this: the self is a complex process that is reflected in the expression of individual will, is embodied with a particular comportment,

is engaged and molded by a given social reality, and is felt subjectively and personally.



When we teach James, it is often the case that our students immediately “get” the importance of the Will to Believe. The power of free will, a force that can change the world and change a life, is something that most young people desperately crave. James’s early exploration into philosophy makes a great deal of sense to most Americans for no other reason than the way that it resonates with what they have been taught about liberty and the possibility and value of acting on one’s own behalf. Bootstrapping of any kind strikes them as not only distinctly possible but completely necessary. One need only put one’s back into it.

What are less intuitive for our students, but no less important for James, are more subtle human capacities that can save us even, and most especially, when our wills falter or fail us. In these cases, our healthy-mindedness turns on an ability to see things otherwise, to adjust our eyes to the darkness, to make a conscious choice about how we interpret the world and where we find meaning. This is not about meaning-making per se, but rather about becoming aware of,

or literally “coming to,” life in a new way. To see things otherwise is possible, and adjusting one’s angle of vision can be as life-altering as transforming one’s life in a heroic act of will—and just as difficult. We see this most clearly in James’s review of Benjamin Blood’s *Anesthetic Revelation* and his essay entitled “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings.”

A key to being less afraid of life is simply to see it a bit more clearly and completely. Shielding one’s eyes when confronted with sudden danger is a protective reflex, yet shutting one’s eyes to the fullness of reality—its novelty, its foreignness, its brutality—can make one feel particularly vulnerable, afraid, and small. At least that is James’s suspicion. “The art of being wise,” James held, “is knowing what to overlook” but also knowing when to pay absolute attention. Following the American transcendentalists who defined his early education at Harvard, especially Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, James entreated his readers to open their eyes to the cosmos—to realize that the world is vastly more complex and nuanced, rich and enriching, than we typically acknowledge. And it is forever accessible, at least for the precious time being. This, for James, is the truth of the matter.

In the second to last section, “Truth and Consequences,” we find James wrestling with this complex-

ity and nuance, both in the rarified air of metaphysics (“What Pragmatism Means”) and on the ground with pressing social problems (“The Moral Equivalent of War”). Not unlike his perspectivist German contemporary Friedrich Nietzsche, James looked through many lenses: that of the epistemologist, social thinker, ethicist, activist, and a metaphysician not afraid to take up a dispute involving a squirrel (we suggest jumping right into “What Pragmatism Means” if you need closure on this squirrel dispute).

One unpopular perspective we might consider is that of the jesting Pontius Pilate, when he inquired of Jesus, *Quid est veritas? What is truth?* Pilate’s question was not a real one, but rather a snide cut at the idea of truth itself, the concept of capital-T Truth. But let’s take this question seriously, as James most certainly did. Is Truth some intuited static relation between the noises and scratches we call words and some corresponding reality out there in the world? Or, as James argues, is the quest for Truth messier, riskier, and more experimental? For humans like us, the truths that we arrive at are always interpretations of the facts, provisional and fallible. This does not mean giving up the ghost on finding Truth in the long-term, but rather realizing that our finite efforts will continue to fall short of a final interpretation of reality. This gloss of James’s theory of truth should hold

certain critics at bay: James is not a crass instrumentalist, and he is not a relativist who says that there is no such thing as Truth. He is just humble about what our human abilities in the short term can accomplish. Pragmatism, James states in italics, is “*the attitude of looking away from first things, principles, ‘categories,’ supposed necessities; and of looking forward towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts.*” The consequences that we encounter in inquiry guide our future investigations, priming us to make more encompassing and experientially rich interpretations in the future. We look and move forward toward effects, ever rippling out, from our guessing games and daily experiments. The truth is not apprehended completely and once and for all. For humans like us, the best one can do is carefully work toward it and around it by degrees.

Yet truth-talk is not idle talk. Ideas have consequences; war is one of them. Nietzsche made this point, quite audaciously, when writing about religious wars, which are, at bottom, wars of ideas—our most fear-soothing, future-proofing ideas. As Nietzsche writes,

The greatest advance of the masses hitherto has been religious war, for it proves that the masses have begun to deal reverently with conceptions of things. Reli-

gious wars only result, when human reason generally has been refined by the subtle disputes of sects; so that even the populace becomes punctilious and regards trifles as important, actually thinking it possible that the “eternal salvation of the soul” may depend upon minute distinctions of concepts.

This may be an ugly truth, but James understood it. The Civil War was a war to end slavery and, in the hopes of abolitionists, tear out the intellectual roots of that brutal institution. William’s two younger brothers, Robertson James and Garth “Wilkie” James, both fought for the Union; Wilkie almost died in 1863, at the Battle of Fort Wagner. William, who sketched the sleeping face of his convalescing young brother, understood that Wilkie nearly died defending an idea.

Not all wars, of course, arise from deep existential clashes; James points to America’s “squalid war with Spain.” In any case, for the clear-eyed historian, peace likely brings no hope, since peacetime seems always and only a prelude to more war, and more, cyclically, endlessly. “Every up-to-date dictionary should say that ‘peace’ and ‘war’ mean the same thing, now *in posse*, now *in actu*” writes James. For “military feelings” and “military instincts” stir many of us, even in democracies. “The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time

to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants,” writes Jefferson, gruesomely. “It is its natural manure.” James puts it more starkly: “History is a bath of blood.”

Consider the title of journalist Chris Hedges’s 2002 book, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*. James grimly agrees. We hold as a “spiritual possession worth more than all the blood poured out” all “those ancestors, those efforts, those memories and legends” from our martial histories. The more sacred the war hero, the more sacred war may seem to us, paradoxically. And here fear rises again: a fear that, war abolished, we would degenerate into a “sheep’s utopia” or “a cat-tleyard of a planet,” as James writes in “The Moral Equivalent of War.” This fear of decline is “now taking the place of the ancient fear of the enemy.”

But James thought that we can water the tree of liberty sufficiently, not with blood, but with the sweat of our brow. We can retain “the supreme theatre of human strenuousness” and tap meaning in struggle, but not vicious struggle. A “war against war” means feeding our need for the hero’s journey, for *Sturm und Drang* (“Storm and Stress”), for valor, for “army-discipline,” but sublimating that hunger into a constructive force. Here is the birth of AmeriCorps and the Peace Corps.

“Be not afraid of life” means be not afraid of risk, failure, even death, in your pursuits. Life is hard, so

it calls for “hardihoods,” even virtues of a martial intensity, but exercised against stronger enemies: poverty, disease, exploitation, degradation, and on, and on. In this fight, James envisions the gain of “toughness without callousness.”

“Great indeed is Fear,” James concludes in “The Moral Equivalent of War,” “but it is not, as our military enthusiasts believe and try to make us believe, the only stimulus known for awakening the higher ranges of men’s spiritual energy.” Nor, we must add, does fear lift us to the *highest* ranges of our spiritual life.



Today, when you step out on the back porch of James’s one-time summer house in Chocorua, your eyes look down a grassy hill into a stand of pines a hundred yards away. Over the last century and a half the trees have crept toward the house itself, a testament to the fact that wilderness can be kept at bay only so long. The woods are dark and deep, and obscure the mountains above the cottage and the lake below. Nature will have its way with us soon enough, much sooner than we tend to appreciate. Perhaps this strikes you as overly dark, a cause for fear and trembling, but William James liked to suggest that apprehension is

not the only, much less the appropriate, response to encroaching shadows. It is a miracle and a blessing that one can see so much, experience so much, do so much, before everything goes black.

James's summer house remains airy and light, although six of the fourteen doors have been boarded up and now serve as walls. But no matter. In James's day, he could poke his head out the front door and see to the top of Chocorua's granite cone, which he often climbed and always loved. He could ply his way across the waters below his house and, in the middle of the lake, dive as deep as he liked without touching the bottom. Dive as deep as you like, you will never reach the bottom. If you do, rest assured that you haven't found the true depth of the water. People from every walk of life, from New York City to northern Maine, still come to take the plunge in Chocorua. James had to come here, at least once a year, to experience "wild American country," but also to reacquaint himself with life beneath and beyond its mere surface. On a very clear night in Chocorua, at the very center of its waters, one can look up or one can look down at a selfsame sight—a scene of utter obscurity speckled with perfect light. This is the site of wonder, sheer bafflement, but also hope. Perhaps, in the end, there is no better reason to be not afraid of life.

## *Determinism and Despair*





# 1

## Letter to Thomas Wren Ward (1868)

### INTRODUCTION

*Some readers have come to this volume with a hope: that while the nineteenth-century American philosopher William James might not save your life, his philosophy can help you be a little less afraid of living fully. We believe this is a reasonable hope. This opening selection, a letter to his friend Thomas Wren Ward, written when James was only twenty-four, demonstrates two antithetical but essential positions that he repeatedly expresses in the writings selected for this anthology. On the one hand, James was never afraid to face the tragedies or darkness of life: Ward was a dramatic depressive, one who gave voice to the universe's evil nature. James looked at his friend's plight clearly and never glossed it for something other than it was. On the other hand, even at his tender age, James never indulged sorrow. Sorrow is sorrow—the question is always whether and how you will bear it.*

*This selection was chosen to open the anthology by virtue of its honesty, its compassion, and ultimately its wisdom. In the year that James wrote to Ward, he took a deep dive into the writings of Europe's most famous pessimist, Arthur Schopenhauer. James came to reject Schopenhauer's philosophy, but only after accepting a number of its essential elements: human life is fleeting, suffering is ubiquitous and unavoidable, and we must accept that we are "companions in misery." This may strike you as unspeakably dour, but this threefold revelation allows James to admit to Ward that he understands the draw of suicide and that he too spent a time "continually" doubting the value of life. This admission, revealing and reassuring, was probably somewhere at the core of the young men's friendship. It would remain the buried foundation of James's philosophy on the whole.*

*James and Ward share a predicament, but also the desire to overcome it: "Well," James took a proverbial deep breath, "neither of us wishes to be a mere loafer; each wishes a work which shall by its mere exercise interest him and at the same time allow him to feel that through it he takes hold of the reality of things—whatever that may be—in some measure." In other words, while the experience of depression is real, so too is the desire to make one's way through it, to the other side of darkness, to find something*

*both interesting and real about this life we are given.* James's advice to Ward presages much of his later psychological and philosophical work. "All I can tell you is the thought that with me outlasts all others, and onto which, like a rock, I find myself washed up when the waves of doubt are weltering over all the rest of the world; and that is the thought of my having a will. . . ." In the face of crisis, one usually has the capacity to act differently, to make a choice about one's circumstances, or, at the very least, to own the sufferings of life in a way that makes more sense. When activity is preempted or impossible, James advises his friend to hold tight to the attendant idea that humans like us have "a capacity for pleasure and pain of different kinds." In short, humans can interpret the world of experience as they wish. It is at last up to us where we discover meaning and significance. This is an inkling that consciousness was key to living a robust Jamesian life.

Finally, James's letter to Ward reflects a metaphysical belief of existential import (or a religious belief of life and death significance): "Remember when old December's darkness is everywhere about you, that the world is really in every minutest point as full of life as in the most joyous morning you ever lived through; that the sun is whanging down, and the waves dancing, and the gulls skimming down at the mouth of

*the Amazon, for instance, as freshly as in the first morning of creation; and the hour is just as fit as any hour that ever was for a new gospel of cheer to be preached.” There are few more powerful expressions of wonder and hope in James’s corpus.*



BERLIN, Jan. 7, 1868.

My beloved old Tom,  
. . . It made me feel quite sad to hear you talk about  
the inward deadness and listlessness into which you  
had again fallen in New York. Bate not a jot of heart  
nor hope, but steer right onward. Take for granted  
that you’ve got a temperament from which you must  
make up your mind to expect twenty times as much  
anguish as other people need to get along with. Re-  
gard it as something as external to you as possible,  
like the curl of your hair. Remember when old De-  
cember’s darkness is everywhere about you, that the  
world is really in every minutest point as full of life  
as in the most joyous morning you ever lived through;  
that the sun is whanging down, and the waves danc-  
ing, and the gulls skimming down at the mouth of the  
Amazon, for instance, as freshly as in the first morn-

ing of creation; and the hour is just as fit as any hour that ever was for a new gospel of cheer to be preached. I am sure that one can, by merely thinking of these matters of fact, limit the power of one's evil moods over one's way of looking at the Kosmos. . . .

My dear old Thomas, you have always sardonically greeted me as the man of calm and clockwork feelings. The reason is that your own vehemence and irregularity was so much greater, that it involuntarily, no matter what my private mood might have been, threw me into an outwardly antagonistic one in which I endeavored to be a clog to your mobility, as it were. So I fancy you have always given me credit for less sympathy with you and understanding of your feelings than I really have had. All last winter, for instance, when I was on the continual verge of suicide, it used to amuse me to hear you chaff my animal contentment. The appearance of it arose from my reaction against what seemed to me your unduly *noisy* and demonstrative despair. The fact is, I think, that we have both gone through a good deal of similar trouble; we resemble each other in being both persons of rather wide sympathies, not particularly logical in the processes of our minds, and of mobile temperament; though your physical temperament being so much more tremendous than mine makes a great

quantitative difference both in your favor, and against you, as the case may be.

Well, neither of us wishes to be a mere loafer; each wishes a work which shall by its mere *exercise* interest him and at the same time allow him to feel that through it he takes hold of the reality of things—whatever that may be—in some measure. Now the first requisite is hard for us to fill, by reason of our wide sympathy and mobility; we can only choose a business in which the evil of feeling restless shall be at a minimum, and then go ahead and make the best of it. That minimum will grow less every year. . . .

The other requirement is hard theoretically, though practically not so hard as the first. All I can tell you is the thought that with me outlasts all others, and onto which, like a rock, I find myself washed up when the waves of doubt are weltering over all the rest of the world; and that is the thought of my having a will, and of my belonging to a brotherhood of men possessed of a capacity for pleasure and pain of different kinds. For even at one's lowest ebb of belief, the fact remains empirically certain (and by our will we can, if not *absolutely* refrain from looking beyond that empirical fact, at least practically and *on the whole* accept it and let it suffice us)—that men suffer and enjoy. And if we have to give up all hope of seeing into the purposes of God,

or to give up theoretically the idea of final causes, and of God anyhow as vain and leading to nothing for us, we can, by our will, make the enjoyment of our brothers stand us in the stead of a final cause; and through a knowledge of the fact that that enjoyment on the whole depends on what individuals accomplish, lead a life so active, and so sustained by a clean conscience as not to need to fret much. Individuals can add to the welfare of the race in a variety of ways. You may delight its senses or "taste" by some production of luxury or art, comfort it by discovering some moral truth, relieve its pain by concocting a new patent medicine, save its labor by a bit of machinery, or by some new application of a natural product. You may open a road, help start some social or business institution, contribute your mite in *any* way to the mass of the work which each generation subtracts from the task of the next; and you will come into *real* relations with your brothers—with some of them at least.

I know that in a certain point of view, and the most popular one, this seems a cold activity for our affections, a stone instead of bread. We long for sympathy, for a purely *personal* communication, first with the soul of the world, and then with the soul of our fellows. And happy are they who think, or know, that they have got them! But to those who must confess

with bitter anguish that they are perfectly isolated from the soul of the world, and that the closest human love encloses a potential germ of estrangement or hatred, that all *personal* relation is finite, conditional, mixed (*vide* in Dana's "Household Book of Poetry," stanzas by C. P. Cranch, "Thought is deeper than speech," etc., etc.), it may not prove such an unfruitful substitute. At least, when you have added to the property of the race, even if no one knows your name, yet it is certain that, without what you have done, some individuals must needs be acting now in a somewhat different manner. You have modified their life; you are in *real* relation with them; you have in so far forth entered into their being. And is that such an unworthy stake to set up for our good, after all? Who are these men anyhow? Our predecessors, even apart from the physical link of generation, have made us what we are. Every thought you now have and every act and intention owes its complexion to the acts of your dead and living brothers. *Everything* we know and are is through men. We have no revelation but through man. Every sentiment that warms your gizzard, every brave act that ever made your pulse bound and your nostril open to a confident breath was a man's act. However mean a man may be, man is *the best we know*; and your loathing as you turn from what you probably call the vulgarity of human life—

your homesick yearning for a *Better*, somewhere—is furnished by your manhood; your ideal is made up of traits suggested by past men's words and actions. Your manhood shuts you in forever, bounds all your thoughts like an overarching sky—and all the Good and True and High and Dear that you know by virtue of your sharing in it. They are the Natural Product of our Race. So that it seems to me that a sympathy with men as such, and a desire to contribute to the weal of a species, which, whatever may be said of it, contains All that we acknowledge as good, may very well form an external interest sufficient to keep one's moral pot boiling in a very lively manner to a good old age. The idea, in short, of becoming an accomplice in a sort of "Mankind its own God or Providence" scheme is a *practical* one.

I don't mean, by any means, to affirm that we must come to that, I only say it is *a* mode of envisaging life; which is capable of affording moral support—and may at any rate help to bridge over the despair of skeptical intervals. I confess that, in the lonesome gloom which beset me for a couple of months last summer, the only feeling that kept me from giving up was that by waiting and living, by hook or crook, long enough, I might make my *nick*, however small a one, in the raw stuff the race has got to shape, and so assert my reality. The stoic feeling of being a sentinel

obeying orders without knowing the general's plans is a noble one. And so is the divine enthusiasm of moral culture (Channing, etc.), and I think that, successively, they may all help to ballast the same man.

What a preacher I'm getting to be! I had no idea when I sat down to begin this long letter that I was going to be carried away so far. I feel like a humbug whenever I endeavor to enunciate moral truths, because I am at bottom so skeptical. But I resolved to throw off "*views*" to you, because I know how stimulated you are likely to be by any accidental point of view or formula which you may not exactly have struck on before (e.g., what you write me of the effect of that sentence of your mother's about marrying). I had no idea this morning that I had so many of the elements of a Pascal in me . . .

Ever thine | Wm. James

# 2

## “The Sick Soul,” from *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902)

### INTRODUCTION

“Help! Help!”

*That cry, or scream, is the “real core of the religious problem,” according to James in The Varieties of Religious Experience, his most famous book.* Earlier in Varieties, James identifies religion as “the feelings, acts, and experiences” of people “in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine.” And what is divine? For James, it denotes “any object that is godlike, whether it be a concrete deity or not.” A godless universe of immutable and immuring laws may be divine. Adding these together universalizes that cry for help; it rises from the theist, atheist, and agnostic alike, because beneath our systems, our theories, our catechisms, all of us bottom out in a vulnerable solitude, where we may find ourselves suffering a deep sickness, a soul-sickness.

*Our lives occur against “a background of possibilities,” says James, which frame each moment, contextualize the present, and for the sick soul, as James calls it, this background is evil; either those possibilities are illusory, as in the determinist vision, or every possibility is curdled, cold, and flat. The lovelier life’s goods, the more bitter and evil that background into which they dissolve. Those with a sick soul “cannot so swiftly throw off the burden of the consciousness of evil.” Theirs is a “world-sickness” that isn’t helped by open air, vacations, promotions, marriages, or any natural good; for them, “Riches take wings; fame is a breath; love is a cheat.”*

*Now some souls are sick from “observation of life and reflection on death,” as is perhaps the case with the great German pessimist Arthur Schopenhauer, but some are “prey of a pathological melancholy,” a clinical disorder, in more contemporary medical language. This is extreme sensitivity, extreme susceptibility, extreme aversion, and exactly this is the problem of “The Sick Soul”; or, to use an idiom common to philosophers of consciousness, we might call it the hard problem of sick souls. This problem gnaws at the heart of The Varieties of Religious Experience. So difficult it is, and so necessary to resolve, that James gives explicit warning as he dives, using actual clinical cases, into the darkest water:*

*Painful indeed they will be to listen to, and there is almost an indecency in handling them in public. Yet they lie right in the middle of our path; and if we are to touch the psychology of religion at all seriously, we must be willing to forget conventionalities, and dive below the smooth and lying official conversational surface.*

*Under this surface even the Stoic's hope of self-possession lapses. The Epicurean's calm is broken. The optimist hushes. The threat is clear: "It may indeed be that no religious reconciliation with the absolute totality of things is possible." It may just be that the universe, in its fullest sum, amounts to a moral catastrophe. "Some evils, indeed, are ministerial to higher forms of good," writes James, then admits, "but it may be that there are forms of evil so extreme as to enter into no good system whatsoever."*



The world now looks remote, strange, sinister, uncanny. Its color is gone, its breath is cold, there is no speculation in the eyes it glares with. "It is as if I lived in another century," says one asylum patient.—"I see everything through a cloud," says another, "things are not as they were, and I am changed."—"I see," says

a third, “I touch, but the things do not come near me, a thick veil alters the hue and look of everything.”—“Persons move like shadows, and sounds seem to come from a distant world.”—“There is no longer any past for me; people appear so strange; it is as if I could not see any reality, as if I were in a theatre; as if people were actors, and everything were scenery; I can no longer find myself; I walk, but why? Everything floats before my eyes, but leaves no impression.”—“I weep false tears, I have unreal hands: the things I see are not real things.”—Such are expressions that naturally rise to the lips of melancholy subjects describing their changed state.

Now there are some subjects whom all this leaves a prey to the profoundest astonishment. The strangeness is wrong. The unreality cannot be. A mystery is concealed, and a metaphysical solution must exist. If the natural world is so double-faced and unhomelike, what world, what thing is real? An urgent wondering and questioning is set up, a poring theoretic activity, and in the desperate effort to get into right relations with the matter, the sufferer is often led to what becomes for him a satisfying religious solution.

At about the age of fifty, Tolstoy relates that he began to have moments of perplexity, of what he calls arrest, as if he knew not “how to live,” or what to do. It is obvious that these were moments in which

the excitement and interest which our functions naturally bring had ceased. Life had been enchanting, it was now flat sober, more than sober, dead. Things were meaningless whose meaning had always been self-evident. The questions "Why?" and "What next?" began to beset him more and more frequently. At first it seemed as if such questions must be answerable, and as if he could easily find the answers if he would take the time; but as they ever became more urgent, he perceived that it was like those first discomforts of a sick man, to which he pays but little attention till they run into one continuous suffering, and then he realizes that what he took for a passing disorder means the most momentous thing in the world for him, means his death.

These questions "Why?" "Wherefore?" "What for?" found no response.

I felt [says Tolstoy] that something had broken within me on which my life had always rested, that I had nothing left to hold on to, and that morally my life had stopped. An invincible force impelled me to get rid of my existence, in one way or another. It cannot be said exactly that I *wished* to kill myself, for the force which drew me away from life was fuller, more powerful, more general than any mere desire. It was a force like my old aspiration to live, only it impelled

me in the opposite direction. It was an aspiration of my whole being to get out of life.

Behold me then, a man happy and in good health, hiding the rope in order not to hang myself to the rafters of the room where every night I went to sleep alone; behold me no longer going shooting, lest I should yield to the too easy temptation of putting an end to myself with my gun.

I did not know what I wanted. I was afraid of life; I was driven to leave it; and in spite of that I still hoped something from it.

All this took place at a time when so far as all my outer circumstances went, I ought to have been completely happy. I had a good wife who loved me and whom I loved; good children and a large property which was increasing with no pains taken on my part. I was more respected by my kinsfolk and acquaintance than I had ever been; I was loaded with praise by strangers; and without exaggeration I could believe my name already famous. Moreover I was neither insane nor ill. On the contrary, I possessed a physical and mental strength which I have rarely met in persons of my age. I could mow as well as the peasants, I could work with my brain eight hours uninterrupted and feel no bad effects.

And yet I could give no reasonable meaning to any actions of my life. And I was surprised that I had not

understood this from the very beginning. My state of mind was as if some wicked and stupid jest was being played upon me by some one. One can live only so long as one is intoxicated, drunk with life; but when one grows sober one cannot fail to see that it is all a stupid cheat. What is truest about it is that there is nothing even funny or silly in it; it is cruel and stupid, purely and simply.

The oriental fable of the traveler surprised in the desert by a wild beast is very old.

Seeking to save himself from the fierce animal, the traveler jumps into a well with no water in it; but at the bottom of this well he sees a dragon waiting with open mouth to devour him. And the unhappy man, not daring to go out lest he should be the prey of the beast, not daring to jump to the bottom lest he should be devoured by the dragon, clings to the branches of a wild bush which grows out of one of the cracks of the well. His hands weaken, and he feels that he must soon give way to certain fate; but still he clings, and sees two mice, one white, the other black, evenly moving round the bush to which he hangs, and gnawing off its roots.

The traveler sees this and knows that he must inevitably perish; but while thus hanging he looks about him and finds on the leaves of the bush some drops of honey. These he reaches with his tongue and licks them off with rapture.

Thus I hang upon the boughs of life, knowing that the inevitable dragon of death is waiting ready to tear me, and I cannot comprehend why I am thus made a martyr. I try to suck the honey which formerly consoled me; but the honey pleases me no longer, and day and night the white mouse and the black mouse gnaw the branch to which I cling. I can see but one thing: the inevitable dragon and the mice—I cannot turn my gaze away from them.

This is no fable, but the literal incontestable truth which every one may understand. What will be the outcome of what I do today? Of what I shall do tomorrow? What will be the outcome of all my life? Why should I live? Why should I do anything? Is there in life any purpose which the inevitable death which awaits me does not undo and destroy?

These questions are the simplest in the world. From the stupid child to the wisest old man, they are in the soul of every human being. Without an answer to them, it is impossible, as I experienced, for life to go on.

“But perhaps,” I often said to myself, “there may be something I have failed to notice or to comprehend. It is not possible that this condition of despair should be natural to mankind.” And I sought for an explanation in all the branches of knowledge acquired by men. I questioned painfully and protractedly and with no idle curiosity. I sought, not with indolence, but la-

boriously and obstinately for days and nights together. I sought like a man who is lost and seeks to save himself,—and I found nothing. I became convinced, moreover, that all those who before me had sought for an answer in the sciences have also found nothing. And not only this, but that they have recognized that the very thing which was leading me to despair—the meaningless absurdity of life—is the only incontestable knowledge accessible to man.

To prove this point, Tolstoy quotes the Buddha, Solomon, and Schopenhauer. And he finds only four ways in which men of his own class and society are accustomed to meet the situation. Either mere animal blindness, sucking the honey without seeing the dragon or the mice,—“and from such a way,” he says, “I can learn nothing, after what I now know”; or reflective epicureanism, snatching what it can while the day lasts,—which is only a more deliberate sort of stupefaction than the first; or manly suicide; or seeing the mice and dragon and yet weakly and plaintively clinging to the bush of life.

Suicide was naturally the consistent course dictated by the logical intellect.

Yet [says Tolstoy], whilst my intellect was working, something else in me was working too, and kept me from the deed—a consciousness of life, as I may call

it, which was like a force that obliged my mind to fix itself in another direction and draw me out of my situation of despair. . . . During the whole course of this year, when I almost unceasingly kept asking myself how to end the business, whether by the rope or by the bullet, during all that time, alongside of all those movements of my ideas and observations, my heart kept languishing with another pining emotion. I can call this by no other name than that of a thirst for God. This craving for God had nothing to do with the movement of my ideas,—in fact, it was the direct contrary of that movement,—but it came from my heart. It was like a feeling of dread that made me seem like an orphan and isolated in the midst of all these things that were so foreign. And this feeling of dread was mitigated by the hope of finding the assistance of some one.

Of the process, intellectual as well as emotional, which, starting from this idea of God, led to Tolstoy's recovery, I will say nothing in this lecture, reserving it for a later hour. The only thing that need interest us now is the phenomenon of his absolute disenchantment with ordinary life, and the fact that the whole range of habitual values may, to a man as powerful and full of faculty as he was, come to appear so ghastly a mockery.

When disillusionment has gone as far as this, there is seldom a *restitutio ad integrum*. One has tasted of the fruit of the tree, and the happiness of Eden never comes again. The happiness that comes, when any does come,—and often enough it fails to return in an acute form, though its form is sometimes very acute,—is not the simple ignorance of ill, but something vastly more complex, including natural evil as one of its elements, but finding natural evil no such stumbling-block and terror because it now sees it swallowed up in supernatural good. The process is one of redemption, not of mere reversion to natural health, and the sufferer, when saved, is saved by what seems to him a second birth, a deeper kind of conscious being than he could enjoy before.

We find a somewhat different type of religious melancholy enshrined in literature in John Bunyan's autobiography. Tolstoy's preoccupations were largely objective, for the purpose and meaning of life in general was what so troubled him; but poor Bunyan's troubles were over the condition of his own personal self. He was a typical case of the psychopathic temperament, sensitive of conscience to a diseased degree, beset by doubts, fears, and insistent ideas, and a victim of verbal automatisms, both motor and sensory. These were usually texts of Scripture which, sometimes damning and sometimes favorable, would come in

a half-hallucinatory form as if they were voices, and fasten on his mind and buffet it between them like a shuttlecock. Added to this were a fearful melancholy self-contempt and despair.

“And now I was sorry that God had made me a man. The beasts, birds, fishes, etc., I blessed their condition, for they had not a sinful nature; they were not obnoxious to the wrath of God; they were not to go to hell-fire after death. I could therefore have rejoiced, had my condition been as any of theirs. Now I blessed the condition of the dog and toad, yea, gladly would I have been in the condition of the dog or horse, for I knew they had no soul to perish under the everlasting weight of Hell or Sin, as mine was like to do. Nay, and though I saw this, felt this, and was broken to pieces with it, yet that which added to my sorrow was, that I could not find with all my soul that I did desire deliverance. My heart was at times exceedingly hard. If I would have given a thousand pounds for a tear, I could not shed one; no, nor sometimes scarce desire to shed one.

“I was both a burthen and a terror to myself; nor did I ever so know, as now, what it was to be weary of my life, and yet afraid to die. How gladly would I have been anything but myself! Anything but a man! and in any condition but my own.”

Poor patient Bunyan, like Tolstoy, saw the light again, but we must also postpone that part of his story to another hour. In a later lecture I will also give the end of the experience of Henry Alline, a devoted evangelist who worked in Nova Scotia a hundred years ago, and who thus vividly describes the high-water mark of the religious melancholy which formed its beginning. The type was not unlike Bunyan's.

“Everything I saw seemed to be a burden to me; the earth seemed accursed for my sake: all trees, plants, rocks, hills, and vales seemed to be dressed in mourning and groaning, under the weight of the curse, and everything around me seemed to be conspiring my ruin. My sins seemed to be laid open; so that I thought that every one I saw knew them, and sometimes I was almost ready to acknowledge many things, which I thought they knew: yea sometimes it seemed to me as if every one was pointing me out as the most guilty wretch upon earth. I had now so great a sense of the vanity and emptiness of all things here below, that I knew the whole world could not possibly make me happy, no, nor the whole system of creation. When I waked in the morning, the first thought would be, Oh, my wretched soul, what shall I do, where shall I go? And when I laid down, would say, I shall be perhaps in hell before morning. I would many times

look on the beasts with envy, wishing with all my heart I was in their place, that I might have no soul to lose; and when I have seen birds flying over my head, have often thought within myself, Oh, that I could fly away from my danger and distress! Oh, how happy should I be, if I were in their place!" . . .

The worst kind of melancholy is that which takes the form of panic fear. Here is an excellent example, for permission to print which I have to thank the sufferer. The original is in French, and though the subject was evidently in a bad nervous condition at the time of which he writes, his case has otherwise the merit of extreme simplicity. I translate freely.

"Whilst in this state of philosophic pessimism and general depression of spirits about my prospects, I went one evening into a dressing-room in the twilight to procure some article that was there; when suddenly there fell upon me without any warning, just as if it came out of the darkness, a horrible fear of my own existence. Simultaneously there arose in my mind the image of an epileptic patient whom I had seen in the asylum, a black-haired youth with greenish skin, entirely idiotic, who used to sit all day on one of the benches, or rather shelves against the wall, with his knees drawn up against his chin, and the coarse gray undershirt, which was his only garment, drawn over

them inclosing his entire figure. He sat there like a sort of sculptured Egyptian cat or Peruvian mummy, moving nothing but his black eyes and looking absolutely non-human. This image and my fear entered into a species of combination with each other. That shape am I, I felt, potentially. Nothing that I possess can defend me against that fate, if the hour for it should strike for me as it struck for him. There was such a horror of him, and such a perception of my own merely momentary discrepancy from him, that it was as if something hitherto solid within my breast gave way entirely, and I became a mass of quivering fear. After this the universe was changed for me altogether. I awoke morning after morning with a horrible dread at the pit of my stomach, and with a sense of the insecurity of life that I never knew before, and that I have never felt since. It was like a revelation; and although the immediate feelings passed away, the experience has made me sympathetic with the morbid feelings of others ever since. It gradually faded, but for months I was unable to go out into the dark alone.” . . .

In none of these cases was there any intellectual insanity or delusion about matters of fact; but were we disposed to open the chapter of really insane melancholia, with its hallucinations and delusions, it would

be a worse story still—desperation absolute and complete, the whole universe coagulating about the sufferer into a material of overwhelming horror, surrounding him without opening or end. Not the conception or intellectual perception of evil, but the grisly blood-freezing heart-palsying sensation of it close upon one, and no other conception or sensation able to live for a moment in its presence. How irrelevantly remote seem all our usual refined optimisms and intellectual and moral consolations in presence of a need of help like this! Here is the real core of the religious problem: Help! help! . . .

Arrived at this point, we can see how great an antagonism may naturally arise between the healthy-minded way of viewing life and the way that takes all this experience of evil as something essential. To this latter way, the morbid-minded way, as we might call it, healthy-mindedness pure and simple seems unspeakably blind and shallow. . . .

In our own attitude, not yet abandoned, of impartial onlookers, what are we to say of this quarrel? It seems to me that we are bound to say that morbid-mindedness ranges over the wider scale of experience, and that its survey is the one that overlaps. The method of averting one's attention from evil and living simply in the light of good is splendid as long as it will work. It will work with many persons; it will

work far more generally than most of us are ready to suppose; and within the sphere of its successful operation there is nothing to be said against it as a religious solution. But it breaks down impotently as soon as melancholy comes; and even though one be quite free from melancholy one's self, there is no doubt that healthy-mindedness is inadequate as a philosophical doctrine, because the evil facts which it refuses positively to account for are a genuine portion of reality. . . .

The normal process of life contains moments as bad as any of those which insane melancholy is filled with, moments in which radical evil gets its innings and takes its solid turn. The lunatic's visions of horror are all drawn from the material of daily fact. Our civilization is founded on the shambles, and every individual existence goes out in a lonely spasm of helpless agony. If you protest, my friend, wait till you arrive there yourself! To believe in the carnivorous reptiles of geologic times is hard for our imagination—they seem too much like mere museum specimens. Yet there is no tooth in any one of those museum-skulls that did not daily through long years of the foretime hold fast to the body struggling in despair of some fated living victim. Forms of horror just as dreadful to their victims, if on a smaller spatial scale, fill the world about us today. Here on our very hearths and in our gardens the infernal cat plays with the

panting mouse, or holds the hot bird fluttering in her jaws. Crocodiles and rattlesnakes and pythons are at this moment vessels of life as real as we are; their loathsome existence fills every minute of every day that drags its length along; and whenever they or other wild beasts clutch their living prey, the deadly horror which an agitated melancholiac feels is the literally right reaction on the situation.

It may indeed be that no religious reconciliation with the absolute totality of things is possible. Some evils, indeed, are ministerial to higher forms of good; but it may be that there are forms of evil so extreme as to enter into no good system whatsoever, and that, in respect of such evil, dumb submission or neglect to notice is the only practical resource.

# 3

## “The Dilemma of Determinism” (1897)

### INTRODUCTION

*“The Dilemma of Determinism” is a relatively late work in James’s corpus, written in the last two decades of his life, but it bears on a crisis that James had faced from his early twenties. In a family of affluence and privilege, where at least three of the children were told they were free to become everything and anything, it is somehow both astonishing and completely unsurprising that they often felt wholly trapped.*

*William James was obsessed with the idea of being free and continually haunted with the thought that he wasn’t. Determinism is the philosophical position that all events, including human action, are ultimately determined by causes external to the will. Philosophers from the ancient Stoics to the modern empiricists have taken determinism to imply that individual human beings have no free will and therefore have limited, or no, moral responsibility. For James, the prospect of*

*determinism was even more existentially destructive: if external forces determined one's life, how could one ever assert "my life is worth living"? It wasn't even one's own life.*

*"The Dilemma of Determinism" articulates this problem in the starker terms, and gestures to the forces that set the stage for determinism's resurgence in the late nineteenth century, particularly the strength of Darwin's findings. Darwin and his supporter Thomas Huxley compellingly argued that human beings—like any organism in the animal kingdom—are controlled and determined by natural law. Our free will is curtailed by our biological and evolutionary past, and our choices and preferences are determined from the outset by a host of factors beyond our control.*

*James rejected this position, arguing for indeterminism, a model of reality that was defined, at intervals and in varying degrees, by chance. It may be true that our lives are often out of our control, but it is also true that there are rare chances in life when individuals get to make a choice about which direction they take and which paths to leave unexplored. Ella Lyman Cabot, one of James's friends and students, once said that "chance is always my chance," which goes a long way in explaining the relationship between chance occurrences and the opportunities we*

*have to exercise our free will. Chance creates the space for us to act in meaningful and creative ways. In the middle of the twentieth century, after surviving a German concentration camp, Victor Frankl wrote, “Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.” This small space may be all that humans like us can hope for, but James believed that it was more than enough.*



A common opinion prevails that the juice has ages ago been pressed out of the free-will controversy, and that no new champion can do more than warm up stale arguments which every one has heard. This is a radical mistake. I know of no subject less worn out, or in which inventive genius has a better chance of breaking open new ground,—not, perhaps, of forcing a conclusion or of coercing assent, but of deepening our sense of what the issue between the two parties really is, of what the ideas of fate and of free will imply. At our very side almost, in the past few years, we have seen falling in rapid succession from the press works that present the alternative in entirely novel lights. Not to speak of the English disciples of Hegel, such as Green and Bradley; not to speak of Hinton

and Hodgson, nor of Hazard here,—we see in the writings of Renouvier, Fouillée, and Delboeuf how completely changed and refreshed is the form of all the old disputes. I cannot pretend to vie in originality with any of the masters I have named, and my ambition limits itself to just one little point. If I can make two of the necessarily implied corollaries of determinism clearer to you than they have been made before, I shall have made it possible for you to decide for or against that doctrine with a better understanding of what you are about. And if you prefer not to decide at all, but to remain doubters, you will at least see more plainly what the subject of your hesitation is. I thus disclaim openly on the threshold all pretension to prove to you that the freedom of the will is true. The most I hope is to induce some of you to follow my own example in assuming it true, and acting as if it were true. If it be true, it seems to me that this is involved in the strict logic of the case. Its truth ought not to be forced willy-nilly down our indifferent throats. It ought to be freely espoused by men who can equally well turn their backs upon it. In other words, our first act of freedom, if we are free, ought in all inward propriety to be to affirm that we are free. This should exclude, it seems to me, from the free-will side of the question all hope of a coercive demonstration,—a

demonstration which I, for one, am perfectly contented to go without.

With thus much understood at the outset, we can advance. But not without one more point understood as well. The arguments I am about to urge all proceed on two suppositions: first, when we make theories about the world and discuss them with one another, we do so in order to attain a conception of things which shall give us subjective satisfaction; and, second, if there be two conceptions, and the one seems to us, on the whole, more rational than the other, we are entitled to suppose that the more rational one is the truer of the two. I hope that you are all willing to make these suppositions with me. . . .

To begin, then, I must suppose you acquainted with all the usual arguments on the subject. I cannot stop to take up the old proofs from causation, from statistics, from the certainty with which we can foretell one another's conduct, from the fixity of character, and all the rest. But there are two words which usually encumber these classical arguments, and which we must immediately dispose of if we are to make any progress. One is the eulogistic word *freedom*, and the other is the opprobrious word *chance*. The word "chance" I wish to keep, but I wish to get rid of the word "freedom." Its eulogistic associations have so

far overshadowed all the rest of its meaning that both parties claim the sole right to use it, and determinists to-day insist that they alone are freedom's champions. Old-fashioned determinism was what we may call hard determinism. It did not shrink from such words as fatality, bondage of the will, necessitation, and the like. Nowadays, we have a soft determinism which abhors harsh words, and, repudiating fatality, necessity, and even predetermination, says that its real name is freedom; for freedom is only necessity understood, and bondage to the highest is identical with true freedom. Even a writer as little used to making capital out of soft words as Mr. Hodgson hesitates not to call himself a "free-will determinist."

Now, all this is a quagmire of evasion under which the real issue of fact has been entirely smothered. Freedom in all these senses presents simply no problem at all. No matter what the soft determinist mean by it,—whether he mean the acting without external constraint; whether he mean the acting rightly, or whether he mean the acquiescing in the law of the whole,—who cannot answer him that sometimes we are free and sometimes we are not? But there is a problem, an issue of fact and not of words, an issue of the most momentous importance, which is often decided without discussion in one sentence,—nay, in one clause of a sentence,—by those very writers who

spin out whole chapters in their efforts to show what “true” freedom is; and that is the question of determinism, about which we are to talk to-night.

Fortunately, no ambiguities hang about this word or about its opposite, indeterminism. Both designate an outward way in which things may happen, and their cold and mathematical sound has no sentimental associations that can bribe our partiality either way in advance. Now, evidence of an external kind to decide between determinism and indeterminism is, as I intimated a while back, strictly impossible to find. Let us look at the difference between them and see for ourselves. What does determinism profess?

It professes that those parts of the universe already laid down absolutely appoint and decree what the other parts shall be. The future has no ambiguous possibilities hidden in its womb: the part we call the present is compatible with only one totality. Any other future complement than the one fixed from eternity is impossible. The whole is in each and every part, and welds it with the rest into an absolute unity, an iron block, in which there can be no equivocation or shadow of turning. . . .

Indeterminism, on the contrary, says that the parts have a certain amount of loose play on one another, so that the laying down of one of them does not necessarily determine what the others shall be. It admits

that possibilities may be in excess of actualities, and that things not yet revealed to our knowledge may really in themselves be ambiguous. Of two alternative futures which we conceive, both may now be really possible; and the one become impossible only at the very moment when the other excludes it by becoming real itself. Indeterminism thus denies the world to be one unbending unit of fact. It says there is a certain ultimate pluralism in it; and, so saying, it corroborates our ordinary unsophisticated view of things. To that view, actualities seem to float in a wider sea of possibilities from out of which they are chosen; and, *somewhere*, indeterminism says, such possibilities exist, and form a part of truth.

Determinism, on the contrary, says they exist nowhere, and that necessity on the one hand and impossibility on the other are the sole categories of the real. Possibilities that fail to get realized are, for determinism, pure illusions: they never were possibilities at all. There is nothing inchoate, it says, about this universe of ours, all that was or is or shall be actual in it having been from eternity virtually there. The cloud of alternatives our minds escort this mass of actuality withal is a cloud of sheer deceptions, to which ‘impossibilities’ is the only name that rightfully belongs.

The issue, it will be seen, is a perfectly sharp one, which no eulogistic terminology can smear over or

wipe out. The truth *must* lie with one side or the other, and its lying with one side makes the other false.

The question relates solely to the existence of possibilities, in the strict sense of the term, as things that may, but need not, be. Both sides admit that a volition, for instance, has occurred. The indeterminists say another volition might have occurred in its place; the determinists swear that nothing could possibly have occurred in its place. Now, can science be called in to tell us which of these two point-blank contradicters of each other is right? Science professes to draw no conclusions but such as are based on matters of fact, things that have actually happened; but how can any amount of assurance that something actually happened give us the least grain of information as to whether another thing might or might not have happened in its place? Only facts can be proved by other facts. With things that are possibilities and not facts, facts have no concern. If we have no other evidence than the evidence of existing facts, the possibility-question must remain a mystery never to be cleared up....

The stronghold of the deterministic sentiment is the antipathy to the idea of chance. As soon as we begin to talk indeterminism to our friends, we find a number of them shaking their heads. This notion of alternative possibility, they say, this admission that any one of several things may come to pass, is, after all,

only a roundabout name for chance; and chance is something the notion of which no sane mind can for an instant tolerate in the world. What is it, they ask, but barefaced crazy unreason, the negation of intelligibility and law? And if the slightest particle of it exist anywhere, what is to prevent the whole fabric from falling together, the stars from going out, and chaos from recommencing her topsy-turvy reign?

Remarks of this sort about chance will put an end to discussion as quickly as anything one can find. I have already told you that “chance” was a word I wished to keep and use. Let us then examine exactly what it means, and see whether it ought to be such a terrible bugbear to us. I fancy that squeezing the thistle boldly will rob it of its sting.

The sting of the word “chance” seems to lie in the assumption that it means something positive, and that if anything happens by chance, it must needs be something of an intrinsically irrational and preposterous sort. Now, chance means nothing of the kind. It is a purely negative and relative term, giving us no information about that of which it is predicated, except that it happens to be disconnected with something else,—not controlled, secured, or necessitated by other things in advance of its own actual presence. As this point is the most subtle one of the whole lecture, and at the same time the point on which all the rest

hinges, I beg you to pay particular attention to it. What I say is that it tells us nothing about what a thing may be in itself to call it "chance." It may be a bad thing, it may be a good thing. It may be lucidity, transparency, fitness incarnate, matching the whole system of other things, when it has once befallen, in an unimaginably perfect way. All you mean by calling it "chance" is that this is not guaranteed, that it may also fall out otherwise. For the system of other things has no positive hold on the chance-thing. Its origin is in a certain fashion negative: it escapes, and says, Hands off! coming, when it comes, as a free gift, or not at all.

This negativeness, however, and this opacity of the chance-thing when thus considered *ab extra*, or from the point of view of previous things or distant things, do not preclude its having any amount of positiveness and luminosity from within, and at its own place and moment. All that its chance-character asserts about it is that there is something in it really of its own, something that is not the unconditional property of the whole. If the whole wants this property, the whole must wait till it can get it, if it be a matter of chance. That the universe may actually be a sort of joint-stock society of this sort, in which the sharers have both limited liabilities and limited powers, is of course a simple and conceivable notion.

Nevertheless, many persons talk as if the minutest dose of disconnectedness of one part with another, the smallest modicum of independence, the faintest tremor of ambiguity about the future, for example, would ruin everything, and turn this goodly universe into a sort of insane sand-heap or nulliverse, no universe at all. Since future human volitions are as a matter of fact the only ambiguous things we are tempted to believe in, let us stop for a moment to make ourselves sure whether their independent and accidental character need be fraught with such direful consequences to the universe as these.

What is meant by saying that my choice of which way to walk home after the lecture is ambiguous and matter of chance as far as the present moment is concerned? It means that both Divinity Avenue and Oxford Street are called; but that only one, and that one *either* one, shall be chosen. Now, I ask you seriously to suppose that this ambiguity of my choice is real; and then to make the impossible hypothesis that the choice is made twice over, and each time falls on a different street. In other words, imagine that I first walk through Divinity Avenue, and then imagine that the powers governing the universe annihilate ten minutes of time with all that it contained, and set me back at the door of this hall just as I was before the choice

was made. Imagine then that, everything else being the same, I now make a different choice and traverse Oxford Street. You, as passive spectators, look on and see the two alternative universes,—one of them with me walking through Divinity Avenue in it, the other with the same me walking through Oxford Street. Now, if you are determinists you believe one of these universes to have been from eternity impossible: you believe it to have been impossible because of the intrinsic irrationality or accidentality somewhere involved in it. But looking outwardly at these universes, can you say which is the impossible and accidental one, and which the rational and necessary one? I doubt if the most iron-clad determinist among you could have the slightest glimmer of light on this point. In other words, either universe *after the fact* and once there would, to our means of observation and understanding, appear just as rational as the other. There would be absolutely no criterion by which we might judge one necessary and the other matter of chance. Suppose now we relieve the gods of their hypothetical task and assume my choice, once made, to be made forever. I go through Divinity Avenue for good and all. If, as good determinists, you now begin to affirm, what all good determinists punctually do affirm, that in the nature of things I *couldn't* have gone

through Oxford Street,—had I done so it would have been chance, irrationality, insanity, a horrid gap in nature,—I simply call your attention to this, that your affirmation is what the Germans call a *Machtspruch*, a mere conception fulminated as a dogma and based on no insight into details. Before my choice, either street seemed as natural to you as to me. Had I happened to take Oxford Street, Divinity Avenue would have figured in your philosophy as the gap in nature; and you would have so proclaimed it with the best deterministic conscience in the world.

But what a hollow outcry, then, is this against a chance which, if it were present to us, we could by no character whatever distinguish from a rational necessity! I have taken the most trivial of examples, but no possible example could lead to any different result. For what are the alternatives which, in point of fact, offer themselves to human volition? What are those futures that now seem matters of chance? Are they not one and all like the Divinity Avenue and Oxford Street of our example? Are they not all of them *kinds* of things already here and based in the existing frame of nature? Is any one ever tempted to produce an *absolute* accident, something utterly irrelevant to the rest of the world? Do not all the motives that assail us, all the futures that offer themselves to our choice, spring equally from the soil of the past; and would

not either one of them, whether realized through chance or through necessity, the moment it was realized, seem to us to fit that past, and in the completest and most continuous manner to interdigitate with the phenomena already there? . . .

. . . Determinism denies the ambiguity of future volitions, because it affirms that nothing future can be ambiguous. But we have said enough to meet the issue. Indeterminate future volitions do mean chance. Let us not fear to shout it from the house-tops if need be; for we now know that the idea of chance is, at bottom, exactly the same thing as the idea of gift,—the one simply being a disparaging, and the other a eulogistic, name for anything on which we have no effective *claim*. And whether the world be the better or the worse for having either chances or gifts in it will depend altogether on *what* these uncertain and unclaimable things turn out to be.

And this at last brings us within sight of our subject. We have seen what determinism means: we have seen that indeterminism is rightly described as meaning chance; and we have seen that chance, the very name of which we are urged to shrink from as from a metaphysical pestilence, means only the negative fact that no part of the world, however big, can claim to control absolutely the destinies of the whole. But although, in discussing the word “chance,” I may at

moments have seemed to be arguing for its real existence, I have not meant to do so yet. We have not yet ascertained whether this be a world of chance or no; at most, we have agreed that it seems so. And I now repeat what I said at the outset, that, from any strict theoretical point of view, the question is insoluble. To deepen our theoretic sense of the *difference* between a world with chances in it and a deterministic world is the most I can hope to do; and this I may now at last begin upon, after all our tedious clearing of the way.

I wish first of all to show you just what the notion that this is a deterministic world implies. The implications I call your attention to are all bound up with the fact that it is a world in which we constantly have to make what I shall, with your permission, call judgments of regret. Hardly an hour passes in which we do not wish that something might be otherwise. . . .

Even from the point of view of our own ends, we should probably make a botch of remodelling the universe. How much more then from the point of view of ends we cannot see! Wise men therefore regret as little as they can. But still some regrets are pretty obstinate and hard to stifle,—regrets for acts of wanton cruelty or treachery, for example, whether performed by others or by ourselves. Hardly any one can remain *entirely* optimistic after reading the confession of the

murderer at Brockton the other day: how, to get rid of the wife whose continued existence bored him, he inveigled her into a desert spot, shot her four times, and then, as she lay on the ground and said to him, "You didn't do it on purpose, did you, dear?" replied, "No, I didn't do it on purpose," as he raised a rock and smashed her skull. Such an occurrence, with the mild sentence and self-satisfaction of the prisoner, is a field for a crop of regrets, which one need not take up in detail. We feel that, although a perfect mechanical fit to the rest of the universe, it is a bad moral fit, and that something else would really have been better in its place.

But for the deterministic philosophy the murder, the sentence, and the prisoner's optimism were all necessary from eternity; and nothing else for a moment had a ghost of a chance of being put into their place. To admit such a chance, the determinists tell us, would be to make a suicide of reason; so we must steel our hearts against the thought. And here our plot thickens, for we see the first of those difficult implications of determinism and monism which it is my purpose to make you feel. If this Brockton murder was called for by the rest of the universe, if it had to come at its preappointed hour, and if nothing else would have been consistent with the sense of the whole, what are we to think of the universe? . . .

We have thus clearly revealed to our view what may be called the dilemma of determinism, so far as determinism pretends to think things out at all. A merely mechanical determinism, it is true, rather rejoices in not thinking them out. It is very sure that the universe must satisfy its postulate of a physical continuity and coherence, but it smiles at any one who comes forward with a postulate of moral coherence as well. I may suppose, however, that the number of purely mechanical or hard determinists among you this evening is small. The determinism to whose seductions you are most exposed is what I have called soft determinism,—the determinism which allows considerations of good and bad to mingle with those of cause and effect in deciding what sort of a universe this may rationally be held to be. The dilemma of this determinism is one whose left horn is pessimism and whose right horn is subjectivism. In other words, if determinism is to escape pessimism, it must leave off looking at the goods and ills of life in a simple objective way, and regard them as materials, indifferent in themselves, for the production of consciousness, scientific and ethical, in us.

To escape pessimism is, as we all know, no easy task. Your own studies have sufficiently shown you the almost desperate difficulty of making the notion

that there is a single principle of things, and that principle absolute perfection, rhyme together with our daily vision of the facts of life. If perfection be the principle, how comes there any imperfection here? If God be good, how came he to create—or, if he did not create, how comes he to permit—the devil? The evil facts must be explained as seeming: the devil must be whitewashed, the universe must be disinfected, if neither God's goodness nor his unity and power are to remain impugned. . . .

. . . The belief in free will is not in the least incompatible with the belief in Providence, provided you do not restrict the Providence to fulminating nothing but *fatal* decrees. If you allow him to provide possibilities as well as actualities to the universe, and to carry on his own thinking in those two categories just as we do ours, chances may be there, uncontrolled even by him, and the course of the universe be really ambiguous; and yet the end of all things may be just what he intended it to be from all eternity.

An analogy will make the meaning of this clear. Suppose two men before a chessboard,—the one a novice, the other an expert player of the game. The expert intends to beat. But he cannot foresee exactly what any one actual move of his adversary may be. He knows, however, all the *possible* moves of the latter;

and he knows in advance how to meet each of them by a move of his own which leads in the direction of victory. And the victory infallibly arrives, after no matter how devious a course, in the one predestined form of check-mate to the novice's king.

Let now the novice stand for us finite free agents, and the expert for the infinite mind in which the universe lies. Suppose the latter to be thinking out his universe before he actually creates it. Suppose him to say, I will lead things to a certain end, but I will not *now* decide on all the steps thereto. At various points, ambiguous possibilities shall be left open, *either* of which, at a given instant, may become actual. But whichever branch of these bifurcations become real, I know what I shall do at the *next* bifurcation to keep things from drifting away from the final result I intend.

The creator's plan of the universe would thus be left blank as to many of its actual details, but all possibilities would be marked down. The realization of some of these would be left absolutely to chance; that is, would only be determined when the moment of realization came. Other possibilities would be *contingently* determined; that is, their decision would have to wait till it was seen how the matters of absolute chance fell out. But the rest of the plan, including its

final upshot, would be rigorously determined once for all. So the creator himself would not need to know *all* the details of actuality until they came; and at any time his own view of the world would be a view partly of facts and partly of possibilities, exactly as ours is now. Of one thing, however, he might be certain; and that is that his world was safe, and that no matter how much it might zig-zag he could surely bring it home at last.

Now, it is entirely immaterial, in this scheme, whether the creator leave the absolute chance-possibilities to be decided by himself, each when its proper moment arrives, or whether, on the contrary, he alienate this power from himself, and leave the decision out and out to finite creatures such as we men are. The great point is that the possibilities are really *here*. Whether it be we who solve them, or he working through us, at those soul-trying moments when fate's scales seem to quiver, and good snatches the victory from evil or shrinks nerveless from the fight, is of small account, so long as we admit that the issue is decided nowhere else than *here* and *now*. That is what gives the palpitating reality to our moral life and makes it tingle, as Mr. Mallock says, with so strange and elaborate an excitement. This reality, this excitement, are what the determinisms, hard and soft alike,

suppress by their denial that *anything* is decided here and now, and their dogma that all things were foredoomed and settled long ago. If it be so, may you and I then have been foredoomed to the error of continuing to believe in liberty.

*Freedom and Life*





# 4

## “The Will to Believe” (1897)

### INTRODUCTION

*“The Will to Believe” is widely regarded as James’s most famous essay—and for good reason. In this essay, which began in 1896 as an address to the philosophical clubs of Yale and Brown universities, James engages directly in a debate that had raged for centuries and resurfaced just as James stepped into the discipline of philosophy. The question at the center of the debate: “When is it justified to believe?” Philosophers like William Clifford, to whom James is responding directly in the selection below, held that belief was justified if and only if there was conclusive evidence regarding the truth of the belief. We are justified in believing that the earth is round, according to Clifford’s Ethics of Belief (1877), only when the empirical evidence has been furnished and fully tested. While he felt that this position was acceptable as far as it went, James worried a great deal that it did not go far enough.*

*James was, throughout his philosophical work, worried about questions the answers of which necessarily*

*remained in doubt. More simply, James believed that there were a host of questions that could not be answered conclusively in an empirical fashion. For better and for worse, these were also some of the most pressing questions of life. Am I free and therefore responsible? Is the universe an evil place or benign? Is there a god? What is the nature of God? Is morality or fairness or justice real and important? Am I a good person, or the type of person who could be a good person? These are essential questions to be answered in the course of an adult life.* According to Clifford, however, one could not even begin to answer them until there is ample evidence. And here is the rub, at least for James: one cannot spend one's life waiting around for evidence; sometimes it is permissible to believe something even when the evidence is wanting.

*Now, to be clear, James is not saying, in "The Will to Believe," that you can believe anything you want. One cannot just ignore the facts of a situation and believe things helter-skelter. James was too much of an empiricist for that. But in matters of the heart, or faith, or morals, James argues quite compellingly for voluntarily adopted faith. We now can make sense of James's comment to Ward in the opening selection regarding his respect for Pascal, who made an adjacent argument to the one that James advances in this essay: in the absence of evidence, it is still best to believe in*

*God, since withholding belief will earn you damnation if you are wrong. For James, you are justified to believe, but for a slightly different reason: James thought that the force of belief might improve the chances that your belief is well placed. How exactly does this work?*

*Think of a mountain climber trapped high in the mountains; the storm is coming and she has no choice but to find the fastest route to the valley below. A very large chasm—six feet wide—cuts across her only path. She has no evidence that she can make the jump and no time to waste. In this case, believing that she can “make it” is the first step in leaping to safety. James recommended that she should go ahead: believe and jump with confidence. In these cases, willing yourself to believe something is philosophically justified; and, more dramatically, James held that maintaining such a belief can change the universe in such a way as to make it more likely that the belief becomes true. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.*



In the recently published Life by Leslie Stephen of his brother, Fitz-James, there is an account of a school to which the latter went when he was a boy. The teacher, a certain Mr. Guest, used to converse with his pupils

in this wise: “Gurney, what is the difference between justification and sanctification?—Stephen, prove the omnipotence of God!” etc. In the midst of our Harvard freethinking and indifference we are prone to imagine that here at your good old orthodox College conversation continues to be somewhat upon this order; and to show you that we at Harvard have not lost all interest in these vital subjects, I have brought with me to-night something like a sermon on justification by faith to read to you,—I mean an essay in justification of faith, a defence of our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced. “The Will to Believe,” accordingly, is the title of my paper.

I have long defended to my own students the lawfulness of voluntarily adopted faith; but as soon as they have got well imbued with the logical spirit, they have as a rule refused to admit my contention to be lawful philosophically, even though in point of fact they were personally all the time chock-full of some faith or other themselves. I am all the while, however, so profoundly convinced that my own position is correct, that your invitation has seemed to me a good occasion to make my statements more clear. Perhaps your minds will be more open than those with which I have hitherto had to deal. I will be as little technical

as I can, though I must begin by setting up some technical distinctions that will help us in the end.

## I.

Let us give the name of *hypothesis* to anything that may be proposed to our belief; and just as the electricians speak of live and dead wires, let us speak of any hypothesis as either *live* or *dead*. A live hypothesis is one which appeals as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed. If I ask you to believe in the Mahdi, the notion makes no electric connection with your nature,—it refuses to scintillate with any credibility at all. As an hypothesis it is completely dead. To an Arab, however (even if he be not one of the Mahdi's followers), the hypothesis is among the mind's possibilities: it is alive. This shows that deadness and liveness in an hypothesis are not intrinsic properties, but relations to the individual thinker. They are measured by his willingness to act. The maximum of liveness in an hypothesis means willingness to act irrevocably. Practically, that means belief; but there is some believing tendency wherever there is willingness to act at all.

Next, let us call the decision between two hypotheses an *option*. Options may be of several kinds. They may be—1, *living* or *dead*; 2, *forced* or *avoidable*;

3, *momentous* or *trivial*; and for our purposes we may call an option a *genuine* option when it is of the forced, living, and momentous kind.

1. A living option is one in which both hypotheses are live ones. If I say to you: “Be a theosophist or be a Mohammedan,” it is probably a dead option, because for you neither hypothesis is likely to be alive. But if I say: “Be an agnostic or be a Christian,” it is otherwise: trained as you are, each hypothesis makes some appeal, however small, to your belief.

2. Next, if I say to you: “Choose between going out with your umbrella or without it,” I do not offer you a genuine option, for it is not forced. You can easily avoid it by not going out at all. Similarly, if I say, “Either love me or hate me,” “Either call my theory true or call it false,” your option is avoidable. You may remain indifferent to me, neither loving nor hating, and you may decline to offer any judgment as to my theory. But if I say, “Either accept this truth or go without it,” I put on you a forced option, for there is no standing place outside of the alternative. Every dilemma based on a complete logical disjunction, with no possibility of not choosing, is an option of this forced kind.

3. Finally, if I were Dr. Nansen and proposed to you to join my North Pole expedition, your option would be momentous; for this would probably be your only similar opportunity, and your choice now

would either exclude you from the North Pole sort of immortality altogether or put at least the chance of it into your hands. He who refuses to embrace a unique opportunity loses the prize as surely as if he tried and failed. *Per contra*, the option is trivial when the opportunity is not unique, when the stake is insignificant, or when the decision is reversible if it later prove unwise. Such trivial options abound in the scientific life. A chemist finds an hypothesis live enough to spend a year in its verification: he believes in it to that extent. But if his experiments prove inconclusive either way, he is quit for his loss of time, no vital harm being done.

It will facilitate our discussion if we keep all these distinctions well in mind.

## II.

The next matter to consider is the actual psychology of human opinion. When we look at certain facts, it seems as if our passional and volitional nature lay at the root of all our convictions. When we look at others, it seems as if they could do nothing when the intellect had once said its say. Let us take the latter facts up first.

Does it not seem preposterous on the very face of it to talk of our opinions being modifiable at will? Can our will either help or hinder our intellect in its

perceptions of truth? Can we, by just willing it, believe that Abraham Lincoln's existence is a myth, and that the portraits of him in *McClure's Magazine* are all of some one else? Can we, by any effort of our will, or by any strength of wish that it were true, believe ourselves well and about when we are roaring with rheumatism in bed, or feel certain that the sum of the two one-dollar bills in our pocket must be a hundred dollars? We can say any of these things, but we are absolutely impotent to believe them; and of just such things is the whole fabric of the truths that we do believe in made up,—matters of fact, immediate or remote, as Hume said, and relations between ideas, which are either there or not there for us if we see them so, and which if not there cannot be put there by any action of our own.

In Pascal's *Thoughts* there is a celebrated passage known in literature as Pascal's wager. In it he tries to force us into Christianity by reasoning as if our concern with truth resembled our concern with the stakes in a game of chance. Translated freely his words are these: You must either believe or not believe that God is—which will you do? Your human reason cannot say. A game is going on between you and the nature of things which at the day of judgment will bring out either heads or tails. Weigh what your gains and your losses would be if you should stake all you have on

heads, or God's existence: if you win in such case, you gain eternal beatitude; if you lose, you lose nothing at all. If there were an infinity of chances, and only one for God in this wager, still you ought to stake your all on God; for though you surely risk a finite loss by this procedure, any finite loss is reasonable, even a certain one is reasonable, if there is but the possibility of infinite gain. Go, then, and take holy water, and have masses said; belief will come and stupefy your scruples,—*Cela vous fera croire et vous abêtira*. Why should you not? At bottom, what have you to lose?

You probably feel that when religious faith expresses itself thus, in the language of the gaming-table, it is put to its last trumps. Surely Pascal's own personal belief in masses and holy water had far other springs; and this celebrated page of his is but an argument for others, a last desperate snatch at a weapon against the hardness of the unbelieving heart. We feel that a faith in masses and holy water adopted wilfully after such a mechanical calculation would lack the inner soul of faith's reality; and if we were ourselves in the place of the Deity, we should probably take particular pleasure in cutting off believers of this pattern from their infinite reward. It is evident that unless there be some pre-existing tendency to believe in masses and holy water, the option offered to the will

by Pascal is not a living option. Certainly no Turk ever took to masses and holy water on its account; and even to us Protestants these means of salvation seem such foregone impossibilities that Pascal's logic, invoked for them specifically, leaves us unmoved. As well might the Mahdi write to us, saying, "I am the Expected One whom God has created in his effulgence. You shall be infinitely happy if you confess me; otherwise you shall be cut off from the light of the sun. Weigh, then, your infinite gain if I am genuine against your finite sacrifice if I am not!" His logic would be that of Pascal; but he would vainly use it on us, for the hypothesis he offers us is dead. No tendency to act on it exists in us to any degree.

The talk of believing by our volition seems, then, from one point of view, simply silly. From another point of view it is worse than silly, it is vile. When one turns to the magnificent edifice of the physical sciences, and sees how it was reared; what thousands of disinterested moral lives of men lie buried in its mere foundations; what patience and postponement, what choking down of preference, what submission to the icy laws of outer fact are wrought into its very stones and mortar; how absolutely impersonal it stands in its vast augustness,—then how besotted and contemptible seems every little sentimentalist who comes blowing his voluntary smoke-wreaths, and pretend-

ing to decide things from out of his private dream! Can we wonder if those bred in the rugged and manly school of science should feel like spewing such subjectivism out of their mouths? The whole system of loyalties which grow up in the schools of science go dead against its toleration; so that it is only natural that those who have caught the scientific fever should pass over to the opposite extreme, and write sometimes as if the incorruptibly truthful intellect ought positively to prefer bitterness and unacceptableness to the heart in its cup. . . .

[T]hat delicious enfant terrible Clifford writes:

Belief is desecrated when given to unproved and unquestioned statements for the solace and private pleasure of the believer, . . . Whoso would deserve well of his fellows in this matter will guard the purity of his belief with a very fanaticism of jealous care, lest at any time it should rest on an unworthy object, and catch a stain which can never be wiped away. . . . If [a] belief has been accepted on insufficient evidence [even though the belief be true, as Clifford on the same page explains] the pleasure is a stolen one. . . . It is sinful because it is stolen in defiance of our duty to mankind. That duty is to guard ourselves from such beliefs as from a pestilence which may shortly master our own body and then spread to the rest

of the town. . . . It is wrong always, everywhere, and for every one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.

### III.

All this strikes one as healthy, even when expressed, as by Clifford, with somewhat too much of robustious pathos in the voice. Free-will and simple wishing do seem, in the matter of our credences, to be only fifth wheels to the coach. Yet if any one should thereupon assume that intellectual insight is what remains after wish and will and sentimental preference have taken wing, or that pure reason is what then settles our opinions, he would fly quite as directly in the teeth of the facts.

It is only our already dead hypotheses that our willing nature is unable to bring to life again. But what has made them dead for us is for the most part a previous action of our willing nature of an antagonistic kind. When I say “willing nature,” I do not mean only such deliberate volitions as may have set up habits of belief that we cannot now escape from,—I mean all such factors of belief as fear and hope, prejudice and passion, imitation and partisanship, the circumpres-  
sure of our caste and set. As a matter of fact we find ourselves believing, we hardly know how or why.

Mr. Balfour gives the name of “authority” to all those influences, born of the intellectual climate, that make hypotheses possible or impossible for us, alive or dead. Here in this room, we all of us believe in molecules and the conservation of energy, in democracy and necessary progress, in Protestant Christianity and the duty of fighting for “the doctrine of the immortal Monroe,” all for no reasons worthy of the name. We see into these matters with no more inner clearness, and probably with much less, than any disbeliever in them might possess. His unconventionality would probably have some grounds to show for its conclusions; but for us, not insight, but the *prestige* of the opinions, is what makes the spark shoot from them and light up our sleeping magazines of faith. Our reason is quite satisfied, in nine hundred and ninety-nine cases out of every thousand of us, if it can find a few arguments that will do to recite in case our credulity is criticised by some one else. Our faith is faith in some one else’s faith, and in the greatest matters this is most the case. Our belief in truth itself, for instance, that there is a truth, and that our minds and it are made for each other,—what is it but a passionate affirmation of desire, in which our social system backs us up? We want to have a truth; we want to believe that our experiments and studies and discussions must put us in a continually better and better position

towards it; and on this line we agree to fight out our thinking lives. But if a pyrrhonistic sceptic asks us *how we know* all this, can our logic find a reply? No! certainly it cannot. It is just one volition against another,—we willing to go in for life upon a trust or assumption which he, for his part, does not care to make.

As a rule we disbelieve all facts and theories for which we have no use. Clifford's cosmic emotions find no use for Christian feelings. Huxley belabors the bishops because there is no use for sacerdotalism in his scheme of life. Newman, on the contrary, goes over to Romanism, and finds all sorts of reasons good for staying there, because a priestly system is for him an organic need and delight. Why do so few "scientists" even look at the evidence for telepathy, so called? Because they think, as a leading biologist, now dead, once said to me, that even if such a thing were true, scientists ought to band together to keep it suppressed and concealed. It would undo the uniformity of Nature and all sorts of other things without which scientists cannot carry on their pursuits. But if this very man had been shown something which as a scientist he might *do* with telepathy, he might not only have examined the evidence, but even have found it good enough. This very law which the logicians would impose upon us—if I may give the name of logicians

to those who would rule out our willing nature here—is based on nothing but their own natural wish to exclude all elements for which they, in their professional quality of logicians, can find no use.

Evidently, then, our non-intellectual nature does influence our convictions. There are passional tendencies and volitions which run before and others which come after belief, and it is only the latter that are too late for the fair; and they are not too late when the previous passional work has been already in their own direction. Pascal's argument, instead of being powerless, then seems a regular clincher, and is the last stroke needed to make our faith in masses and holy water complete. The state of things is evidently far from simple; and pure insight and logic, whatever they might do ideally, are not the only things that really do produce our creeds.

#### IV.

Our next duty, having recognized this mixed-up state of affairs, is to ask whether it be simply reprehensible and pathological, or whether, on the contrary, we must treat it as a normal element in making up our minds. The thesis I defend is, briefly stated, this: *Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a*

*genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, “Do not decide, but leave the question open,” is itself a passional decision,—just like deciding yes or no,—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth.* The thesis thus abstractly expressed will, I trust, soon become quite clear. . . .

## VI.

. . . Objective evidence and certitude are doubtless very fine ideals to play with, but where on this moonlit and dream-visited planet are they found? I am, therefore, myself a complete empiricist so far as my theory of human knowledge goes. I live, to be sure, by the practical faith that we must go on experiencing and thinking over our experience, for only thus can our opinions grow more true; but to hold any one of them—I absolutely do not care which—as if it never could be reinterpretable or corrigible, I believe to be a tremendously mistaken attitude, and I think that the whole history of philosophy will bear me out. There is but one indefectibly certain truth, and that is the truth that pyrrhonistic scepticism itself leaves standing,—the truth that the present phenomenon of consciousness exists. That, however, is the bare starting-point of knowledge, the mere admission of a

stuff to be philosophized about. The various philosophies are but so many attempts at expressing what this stuff really is. And if we repair to our libraries what disagreement do we discover! Where is a certainly true answer found? Apart from abstract propositions of comparison (such as two and two are the same as four), propositions which tell us nothing by themselves about concrete reality, we find no proposition ever regarded by any one as evidently certain that has not either been called a falsehood, or at least had its truth sincerely questioned by some one else. The transcending of the axioms of geometry, not in play but in earnest, by certain of our contemporaries (as Zöllner and Charles H. Hinton), and the rejection of the whole Aristotelian logic by the Hegelians, are striking instances in point.

No concrete test of what is really true has ever been agreed upon. Some make the criterion external to the moment of perception, putting it either in revelation, the *consensus gentium*, the instincts of the heart, or the systematized experience of the race. Others make the perceptive moment its own test,—Descartes, for instance, with his clear and distinct ideas guaranteed by the veracity of God; Reid with his “common-sense”; and Kant with his forms of synthetic judgment *a priori*. The inconceivability of the opposite; the capacity to be verified by sense; the possession of

complete organic unity or self-relation, realized when a thing is its own other,—are standards which, in turn, have been used. The much lauded objective evidence is never triumphantly there, it is a mere aspiration or *Grenzbegriff*, marking the infinitely remote ideal of our thinking life. To claim that certain truths now possess it, is simply to say that when you think them true and they *are* true, then their evidence is objective, otherwise it is not. But practically one's conviction that the evidence one goes by is of the real objective brand, is only one more subjective opinion added to the lot. For what a contradictory array of opinions have objective evidence and absolute certitude been claimed! The world is rational through and through,—its existence is an ultimate brute fact; there is a personal God,—a personal God is inconceivable; there is an extra-mental physical world immediately known,—the mind can only know its own ideas; a moral imperative exists,—obligation is only the resultant of desires; a permanent spiritual principle is in every one,—there are only shifting states of mind; there is an endless chain of causes,—there is an absolute first cause; an eternal necessity,—a freedom; a purpose,—no purpose; a primal One,—a primal Many; a universal continuity,—an essential discontinuity in things; an infinity,—no infinity. There is this,—there is that; there is indeed nothing which

some one has not thought absolutely true, while his neighbor deemed it absolutely false; and not an absolutist among them seems ever to have considered that the trouble may all the time be essential, and that the intellect, even with truth directly in its grasp, may have no infallible signal for knowing whether it be truth or no. When, indeed, one remembers that the most striking practical application to life of the doctrine of objective certitude has been the conscientious labors of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, one feels less tempted than ever to lend the doctrine a respectful ear.

But please observe, now, that when as empiricists we give up the doctrine of objective certitude, we do not thereby give up the quest or hope of truth itself. We still pin our faith on its existence, and still believe that we gain an ever better position towards it by systematically continuing to roll up experiences and think. Our great difference from the scholastic lies in the way we face. The strength of his system lies in the principles, the origin, the *terminus a quo* of his thought; for us the strength is in the outcome, the upshot, the *terminus ad quem*. Not where it comes from but what it leads to is to decide. It matters not to an empiricist from what quarter an hypothesis may come to him: he may have acquired it by fair means or by foul; passion may have whispered or accident

suggested it; but if the total drift of thinking continues to confirm it, that is what he means by its being true. . . .

## VIII.

And now, after all this introduction, let us go straight at our question. I have said, and now repeat it, that not only as a matter of fact do we find our passional nature influencing us in our opinions, but that there are some options between opinions in which this influence must be regarded both as an inevitable and as a lawful determinant of our choice.

I fear here that some of you my hearers will begin to scent danger, and lend an inhospitable ear. Two first steps of passion you have indeed had to admit as necessary,—we must think so as to avoid dupery, and we must think so as to gain truth; but the surest path to those ideal consummations, you will probably consider, is from now onwards to take no further passional step.

Well, of course, I agree as far as the facts will allow. Wherever the option between losing truth and gaining it is not momentous, we can throw the chance of *gaining truth* away, and at any rate save ourselves from any chance of *believing falsehood*, by not making up our minds at all till objective evidence has come. In scientific questions, this is almost always the

case; and even in human affairs in general, the need of acting is seldom so urgent that a false belief to act on is better than no belief at all. Law courts, indeed, have to decide on the best evidence attainable for the moment, because a judge's duty is to make law as well as to ascertain it, and (as a learned judge once said to me) few cases are worth spending much time over: the great thing is to have them decided on *any* acceptable principle, and got out of the way. But in our dealings with objective nature we obviously are recorders, not makers, of the truth; and decisions for the mere sake of deciding promptly and getting on to the next business would be wholly out of place. Throughout the breadth of physical nature facts are what they are quite independently of us, and seldom is there any such hurry about them that the risks of being duped by believing a premature theory need be faced. The questions here are always trivial options, the hypotheses are hardly living (at any rate not living for us spectators), the choice between believing truth or falsehood is seldom forced. The attitude of sceptical balance is therefore the absolutely wise one if we would escape mistakes. What difference, indeed, does it make to most of us whether we have or have not a theory of the Röntgen rays, whether we believe or not in mind-stuff, or have a conviction about the causality of conscious states? It makes no difference. Such options are not forced on us. On every account it is

better not to make them, but still keep weighing reasons *pro et contra* with an indifferent hand.

I speak, of course, here of the purely judging mind. For purposes of discovery such indifference is to be less highly recommended, and science would be far less advanced than she is if the passionate desires of individuals to get their own faiths confirmed had been kept out of the game. See for example the sagacity which Spencer and Weismann now display. On the other hand, if you want an absolute duffer in an investigation, you must, after all, take the man who has no interest whatever in its results: he is the warranted incapable, the positive fool. The most useful investigator, because the most sensitive observer, is always he whose eager interest in one side of the question is balanced by an equally keen nervousness lest he become deceived. Science has organized this nervousness into a regular *technique*, her so-called method of verification; and she has fallen so deeply in love with the method that one may even say she has ceased to care for truth by itself at all. It is only truth as technically verified that interests her. The truth of truths might come in merely affirmative form, and she would decline to touch it. Such truth as that, she might repeat with Clifford, would be stolen in defiance of her duty to mankind. Human passions, however, are stronger than technical rules. “Le coeur a ses raisons,” as Pascal says, “que la raison ne connaît pas”; and

however indifferent to all but the bare rules of the game the umpire, the abstract intellect, may be, the concrete players who furnish him the materials to judge of are usually, each one of them, in love with some pet “live hypothesis” of his own. Let us agree, however, that wherever there is no forced option, the dispassionately judicial intellect with no pet hypothesis, saving us, as it does, from dupery at any rate, ought to be our ideal.

The question next arises: Are there not somewhere forced options in our speculative questions, and can we (as men who may be interested at least as much in positively gaining truth as in merely escaping dupery) always wait with impunity till the coercive evidence shall have arrived? It seems *a priori* improbable that the truth should be so nicely adjusted to our needs and powers as that. In the great boarding-house of nature, the cakes and the butter and the syrup seldom come out so even and leave the plates so clean. Indeed, we should view them with scientific suspicion if they did.

## IX.

*Moral questions* immediately present themselves as questions whose solution cannot wait for sensible proof. A moral question is a question not of what sensibly exists, but of what is good, or would be good if

it did exist. Science can tell us what exists; but to compare the *worths*, both of what exists and of what does not exist, we must consult not science, but what Pascal calls our heart. Science herself consults her heart when she lays it down that the infinite ascertainment of fact and correction of false belief are the supreme goods for man. Challenge the statement, and science can only repeat it oracularly, or else prove it by showing that such ascertainment and correction bring man all sorts of other goods which man's heart in turn declares. The question of having moral beliefs at all or not having them is decided by our will. Are our moral preferences true or false, or are they only odd biological phenomena, making things good or bad for *us*, but in themselves indifferent? How can your pure intellect decide? If your heart does not *want* a world of moral reality, your head will assuredly never make you believe in one. Mephistophelian scepticism, indeed, will satisfy the head's play-instincts much better than any rigorous idealism can. Some men (even at the student age) are so naturally cool-hearted that the moralistic hypothesis never has for them any pungent life, and in their supercilious presence the hot young moralist always feels strangely ill at ease. The appearance of knowingness is on their side, of *naïveté* and gullibility on his. Yet, in the inarticulate heart of him, he clings to it that he is not a

dupe, and that there is a realm in which (as Emerson says) all their wit and intellectual superiority is no better than the cunning of a fox. Moral scepticism can no more be refuted or proved by logic than intellectual scepticism can. When we stick to it that there is truth (be it of either kind), we do so with our whole nature, and resolve to stand or fall by the results. The sceptic with his whole nature adopts the doubting attitude; but which of us is the wiser, Omniscience only knows.

Turn now from these wide questions of good to a certain class of questions of fact, questions concerning personal relations, states of mind between one man and another. *Do you like me or not?*—for example. Whether you do or not depends, in countless instances, on whether I meet you half-way, am willing to assume that you must like me, and show you trust and expectation. The previous faith on my part in your liking's existence is in such cases what makes your liking come. But if I stand aloof, and refuse to budge an inch until I have objective evidence, until you shall have done something apt, as the absolutists say, *ad extorquendum assensum meum*, ten to one your liking never comes. How many women's hearts are vanquished by the mere sanguine insistence of some man that they *must* love him! he will not consent to the hypothesis that they cannot. The desire for

a certain kind of truth here brings about that special truth's existence; and so it is in innumerable cases of other sorts. Who gains promotions, boons, appointments, but the man in whose life they are seen to play the part of live hypotheses, who discounts them, sacrifices other things for their sake before they have come, and takes risks for them in advance? His faith acts on the powers above him as a claim, and creates its own verification.

A social organism of any sort whatever, large or small, is what it is because each member proceeds to his own duty with a trust that the other members will simultaneously do theirs. Wherever a desired result is achieved by the co-operation of many independent persons, its existence as a fact is a pure consequence of the precursive faith in one another of those immediately concerned. A government, an army, a commercial system, a ship, a college, an athletic team, all exist on this condition, without which not only is nothing achieved, but nothing is even attempted. A whole train of passengers (individually brave enough) will be looted by a few highwaymen, simply because the latter can count on one another, while each passenger fears that if he makes a movement of resistance, he will be shot before any one else backs him up. If we believed that the whole car-full would rise at once with us, we should each severally rise, and

train-robbing would never even be attempted. There are, then, cases where a fact cannot come at all unless a preliminary faith exists in its coming. *And where faith in a fact can help create the fact*, that would be an insane logic which should say that faith running ahead of scientific evidence is the “lowest kind of immorality” into which a thinking being can fall. Yet such is the logic by which our scientific absolutists pretend to regulate our lives!

## X.

In truths dependent on our personal action, then, faith based on desire is certainly a lawful and possibly an indispensable thing.

But now, it will be said, these are all childish human cases, and have nothing to do with great cosmical matters, like the question of religious faith. Let us then pass on to that. Religions differ so much in their accidents that in discussing the religious question we must make it very generic and broad. What then do we now mean by the religious hypothesis? Science says things are; morality says some things are better than other things; and religion says essentially two things.

First, she says that the best things are the more eternal things, the overlapping things, the things in the

universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word. “Perfection is eternal,”—this phrase of Charles Secrétan seems a good way of putting this first affirmation of religion, an affirmation which obviously cannot yet be verified scientifically at all.

The second affirmation of religion is that we are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true.

Now, let us consider what the logical elements of this situation are *in case the religious hypothesis in both its branches be really true.* (Of course, we must admit that possibility at the outset. If we are to discuss the question at all, it must involve a living option. If for any of you religion be a hypothesis that cannot, by any living possibility be true, then you need go no farther. I speak to the “saving remnant” alone.) So proceeding, we see, first, that religion offers itself as a *momentous* option. We are supposed to gain, even now, by our belief, and to lose by our non-belief, a certain vital good. Secondly, religion is a *forced* option, so far as that good goes. We cannot escape the issue by remaining sceptical and waiting for more light, because, although we do avoid error in that way *if religion be untrue*, we lose the good, *if it be true*, just as certainly as if we positively chose to disbelieve. It is as if a man should hesitate indefinitely

to ask a certain woman to marry him because he was not perfectly sure that she would prove an angel after he brought her home. Would he not cut himself off from that particular angel-possibility as decisively as if he went and married some one else? Scepticism, then, is not avoidance of option; it is option of a certain particular kind of risk. *Better risk loss of truth than chance of error*,—that is your faith-vetoer's exact position. He is actively playing his stake as much as the believer is; he is backing the field against the religious hypothesis, just as the believer is backing the religious hypothesis against the field. To preach scepticism to us as a duty until “sufficient evidence” for religion be found, is tantamount therefore to telling us, when in presence of the religious hypothesis, that to yield to our fear of its being error is wiser and better than to yield to our hope that it may be true. It is not intellect against all passions, then; it is only intellect with one passion laying down its law. And by what, forsooth, is the supreme wisdom of this passion warranted? Dupery for dupery, what proof is there that dupery through hope is so much worse than dupery through fear? I, for one, can see no proof; and I simply refuse obedience to the scientist's command to imitate his kind of option, in a case where my own stake is important enough to give me the right to choose my own form of risk. If religion be true and

the evidence for it be still insufficient, I do not wish, by putting your extinguisher upon my nature (which feels to me as if it had after all some business in this matter), to forfeit my sole chance in life of getting upon the winning side,—that chance depending, of course, on my willingness to run the risk of acting as if my passionnal need of taking the world religiously might be prophetic and right.

All this is on the supposition that it really may be prophetic and right, and that, even to us who are discussing the matter, religion is a live hypothesis which may be true. Now, to most of us religion comes in a still further way that makes a veto on our active faith even more illogical. The more perfect and more eternal aspect of the universe is represented in our religions as having personal form. The universe is no longer a mere *It* to us, but a *Thou*, if we are religious; and any relation that may be possible from person to person might be possible here. For instance, although in one sense we are passive portions of the universe, in another we show a curious autonomy, as if we were small active centres on our own account. We feel, too, as if the appeal of religion to us were made to our own active good-will, as if evidence might be forever withheld from us unless we met the hypothesis half-way. . . .

. . . But sad experience makes me fear that some of you may still shrink from radically saying with me,

*in abstracto*, that we have the right to believe at our own risk any hypothesis that is live enough to tempt our will. I suspect, however, that if this is so, it is because you have got away from the abstract logical point of view altogether, and are thinking (perhaps without realizing it) of some particular religious hypothesis which for you is dead. The freedom to “believe what we will” you apply to the case of some patent superstition; and the faith you think of is the faith defined by the schoolboy when he said, “Faith is when you believe something that you know ain’t true.” I can only repeat that this is misapprehension. *In concreto*, the freedom to believe can only cover living options which the intellect of the individual cannot by itself resolve; and living options never seem absurdities to him who has them to consider. When I look at the religious question as it really puts itself to concrete men, and when I think of all the possibilities which both practically and theoretically it involves, then this command that we shall put a stopper on our heart, instincts, and courage, and *wait*—acting of course meanwhile more or less as if religion were *not* true—till doomsday, or till such time as our intellect and senses working together may have raked in evidence enough,—this command, I say, seems to me the queerest idol ever manufactured in the philosophic cave. Were we scholastic absolutists, there might be more excuse. If we had an infallible intellect with its objective

certitudes, we might feel ourselves disloyal to such a perfect organ of knowledge in not trusting to it exclusively, in not waiting for its releasing word. But if we are empiricists, if we believe that no bell in us tolls to let us know for certain when truth is in our grasp, then it seems a piece of idle fantasticality to preach so solemnly our duty of waiting for the bell. Indeed we *may* wait if we will,—I hope you do not think that I am denying that,—but if we do so, we do so at our peril as much as if we believed. In either case we *act*, taking our life in our hands. No one of us ought to issue vetoes to the other, nor should we bandy words of abuse. We ought, on the contrary, delicately and profoundly to respect one another's mental freedom: then only shall we bring about the intellectual republic; then only shall we have that spirit of inner tolerance without which all our outer tolerance is soulless, and which is empiricism's glory; then only shall we live and let live, in speculative as well as in practical things.

I began by a reference to Fitz James Stephen; let me end by a quotation from him.

What do you think of yourself? What do you think of the world? . . . These are questions with which all must deal as it seems good to them. They are riddles of the Sphinx, and in some way or other we must deal

with them. . . . In all important transactions of life we have to take a leap in the dark. . . . If we decide to leave the riddles unanswered, that is a choice; if we waver in our answer, that, too, is a choice: but whatever choice we make, we make it at our peril. If a man chooses to turn his back altogether on God and the future, no one can prevent him; no one can show beyond reasonable doubt that he is mistaken. If a man thinks otherwise and acts as he thinks, I do not see that any one can prove that he is mistaken. Each must act as he thinks best; and if he is wrong, so much the worse for him. We stand on a mountain pass in the midst of whirling snow and blinding mist, through which we get glimpses now and then of paths which may be deceptive. If we stand still we shall be frozen to death. If we take the wrong road we shall be dashed to pieces. We do not certainly know whether there is any right one. What must we do? "Be strong and of a good courage." Act for the best, hope for the best, and take what comes. . . . If death ends all, we cannot meet death better.

# 5

## “Is Life Worth Living?” (1897)

### INTRODUCTION

“Is life worth living?” This is the unspoken question at the heart of daily life. Every day that we wake up, eat breakfast, get our kids ready for school, and go to work, we answer, at least tacitly, in the affirmative. On shadowy days when we stay in bed and flirt with permanent darkness, we entertain a very different sort of answer: “No, life is not worth living.” Having struggled with depression and the dilemma of determinism for most of his life, James was aware of the centrality of this existential question and faced it squarely in a lecture that he gave to the Cambridge YMCA in May 1895. The question “Is life worth living?” is central for many philosophers. It is at the heart of Albert Camus’s famous assertion in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that there is but one serious philosophical question and that is the question of suicide; “All the rest—whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterwards.” In 1895, James was

*asked to address a spate of suicides on Harvard's campus the year before and to provide a reasonable answer. James's response? Well, maybe life is valuable, "it depends on the liver."*

*This may strike you as a philosophical cop-out, as James's inability to provide a solid answer to the most vital of human questions. James, however, took seriously the angst and hardship that accompanies human existence; some lives may be truly unbearable. James demanded that his audience at least acknowledge this fact. He also, and more importantly, claimed that we hold the meaning of life in our hands: it is up to us to determine the significance of life, of our own life. It is up to each of us to make of life "what we will." No social convention, no powerful deity, and no destiny determines the worth of life. Each of us gets to choose how to exercise our wills, where to find meaning, and where to place our devotion. That is at the heart of James's philosophy and the ultimate, yet open-ended, conclusion of this selection.*

*There is another, more complex, way of reading James's response to the question "Is life worth living?" From beginning to end, James affirms a universe that is shot through with contingency, that is, with the chances that provide the space for our free activity. Our world abounds with opportunities that we can seize or neglect, to our detriment or betterment.*

*Human beings flourish, according to James, when they negotiate the “maybes” of life, in experiences, trials, and ventures that have no foreordained outcomes, no guarantees, but rather turn on our own efforts and our own interpretation of events. Does this person love me? Should I forgive this person? Should I believe in God? Should I go to this school? Should I take this job? Should I be moral? Well, maybe—it depends on the liver. In other words, it depends on you and me; for a philosopher obsessed with the prospects of human freedom, this was the only answer.*



When Mr. Mallock's book with this title appeared some fifteen years ago, the jocose answer that "it depends on the *liver*" had great currency in the newspapers. The answer which I propose to give to-night cannot be jocose. In the words of one of Shakespeare's prologues,—

"I come no more to make you laugh; things now,  
That bear a weighty and a serious brow,  
Sad, high, and working, full of state and woe,"—

must be my theme. In the deepest heart of all of us there is a corner in which the ultimate mystery of things works sadly; and I know not what such an association as yours intends, nor what you ask of those

whom you invite to address you, unless it be to lead you from the surface-glamour of existence, and for an hour at least to make you heedless to the buzzing and jiggling and vibration of small interests and excitements that form the tissue of our ordinary consciousness. Without further explanation or apology, then, I ask you to join me in turning an attention, commonly too unwilling, to the profounder bass-note of life. Let us search the lonely depths for an hour together, and see what answers in the last folds and recesses of things our question may find.

## I.

With many men the question of life's worth is answered by a temperamental optimism which makes them incapable of believing that anything seriously evil can exist. Our dear old Walt Whitman's works are the standing text-book of this kind of optimism. The mere joy of living is so immense in Walt Whitman's veins that it abolishes the possibility of any other kind of feeling:—

“To breathe the air, how delicious!  
To speak, to walk, to seize something by the hand! . . .  
To be this incredible God I am! . . .  
O amazement of things, even the least particle!

O spirituality of things!  
I too carol the Sun, usher'd or at noon, or as now,  
    setting;  
I too throb to the brain and beauty of the earth and of  
    all the  
        growths of the earth. . . .

I sing to the last the equalities, modern or old, I sing  
    the endless finales of things,  
I say Nature continues—glory continues.  
I praise with electric voice,  
For I do not see one imperfection in the universe,  
And I do not see one cause or result lamentable at  
    last.”. . .

If moods like this could be made permanent, and constitutions like these universal, there would never be any occasion for such discourses as the present one. No philosopher would seek to prove articulately that life is worth living, for the fact that it absolutely is so would vouch for itself, and the problem disappear in the vanishing of the question rather than in the coming of anything like a reply. But we are not magicians to make the optimistic temperament universal; and alongside of the deliverances of temperamental optimism concerning life, those of temperamental pessimism always exist, and oppose to them a standing refutation. In what is called “circular insanity,” phases

of melancholy succeed phases of mania, with no outward cause that we can discover; and often enough to one and the same well person life will present incarnate radiance to-day and incarnate dreariness to-morrow, according to the fluctuations of what the older medical books used to call “the concoction of the humors.” In the words of the newspaper joke, “it depends on the liver.” Rousseau’s ill-balanced constitution undergoes a change, and behold him in his latter evil days a prey to melancholy and black delusions of suspicion and fear. Some men seem launched upon the world even from their birth with souls as incapable of happiness as Walt Whitman’s was of gloom, and they have left us their messages in even more lasting verse than his,—the exquisite Leopardi, for example; or our own contemporary, James Thomson, in that pathetic book, *The City of Dreadful Night*, which I think is less well-known than it should be for its literary beauty, simply because men are afraid to quote its words,—they are so gloomy, and at the same time so sincere. In one place the poet describes a congregation gathered to listen to a preacher in a great unillumined cathedral at night. The sermon is too long to quote, but it ends thus:—

“O Brothers of sad lives! they are so brief; A few  
short years must bring us all relief:

Can we not bear these years of laboring breath. But if  
you would not this poor life fulfil,  
Lo, you are free to end it when you will,  
Without the fear of waking after death.'—” . . .

. . . That life is *not* worth living the whole army of suicides declare,—an army whose roll-call, like the famous evening gun of the British army, follows the sun round the world and never terminates. We, too, as we sit here in our comfort, must “ponder these things” also, for we are of one substance with these suicides, and their life is the life we share. The plainest intellectual integrity,—nay, more, the simplest manliness and honor, forbid us to forget their case.

If suddenly [says Mr. Ruskin] in the midst of the enjoyments of the palate and lightnesses of heart of a London dinner-party, the walls of the chamber were parted, and through their gap the nearest human beings who were famishing and in misery were borne into the midst of the company feasting and fancy free; if, pale from death, horrible in destitution, broken by despair, body by body they were laid upon the soft carpet, one beside the chair of every guest,—would only the crumbs of the dainties be cast to them; would only a passing glance, a passing thought, be vouchsafed to them? Yet the actual facts, the real relation of each Dives and Lazarus, are not altered by the in-

tervention of the house-wall between the table and the sick-bed,—by the few feet of ground (how few!) which are, indeed, all that separate the merriment from the misery.

## II.

To come immediately to the heart of my theme, then, what I propose is to imagine ourselves reasoning with a fellow-mortal who is on such terms with life that the only comfort left him is to brood on the assurance, "You may end it when you will." What reasons can we plead that may render such a brother (or sister) willing to take up the burden again? Ordinary Christians, reasoning with would-be suicides, have little to offer them beyond the usual negative, "Thou shalt not." God alone is master of life and death, they say, and it is a blasphemous act to anticipate his absolving hand. But can *we* find nothing richer or more positive than this, no reflections to urge whereby the suicide may actually see, and in all sad seriousness feel, that in spite of adverse appearances even for him life is still worth living? There are suicides and suicides (in the United States about three thousand of them every year), and I must frankly confess that with perhaps the majority of these my suggestions are impotent to deal. Where suicide is the result of insanity

or sudden frenzied impulse, reflection is impotent to arrest its headway; and cases like these belong to the ultimate mystery of evil, concerning which I can only offer considerations tending toward religious patience at the end of this hour. My task, let me say now, is practically narrow, and my words are to deal only with that metaphysical *tedium vitae* which is peculiar to reflecting men. Most of you are devoted, for good or ill, to the reflective life. Many of you are students of philosophy, and have already felt in your own persons the scepticism and unreality that too much grubbing in the abstract roots of things will breed. This is, indeed, one of the regular fruits of the over-studious career. Too much questioning and too little active responsibility lead, almost as often as too much sensualism does, to the edge of the slope, at the bottom of which lie pessimism and the nightmare or suicidal view of life. But to the diseases which reflection breeds, still further reflection can oppose effective remedies; and it is of the melancholy and *Weltschmerz* bred of reflection that I now proceed to speak.

Let me say, immediately, that my final appeal is to nothing more recondite than religious faith. So far as my argument is to be destructive, it will consist in nothing more than the sweeping away of certain views that often keep the springs of religious faith compressed; and so far as it is to be constructive, it will

consist in holding up to the light of day certain considerations calculated to let loose these springs in a normal, natural way. Pessimism is essentially a religious disease. In the form of it to which you are most liable, it consists in nothing but a religious demand to which there comes no normal religious reply.

Now, there are two stages of recovery from this disease, two different levels upon which one may emerge from the midnight view to the daylight view of things, and I must treat of them in turn. The second stage is the more complete and joyous, and it corresponds to the freer exercise of religious trust and fancy. There are, as is well known, persons who are naturally very free in this regard, others who are not at all so. There are persons, for instance, whom we find indulging to their heart's content in prospects of immortality; and there are others who experience the greatest difficulty in making such a notion seem real to themselves at all. These latter persons are tied to their senses, restricted to their natural experience; and many of them, moreover, feel a sort of intellectual loyalty to what they call "hard facts," which is positively shocked by the easy excursions into the unseen that other people make at the bare call of sentiment. Minds of either class may, however, be intensely religious. They may equally desire atonement and reconciliation, and crave acquiescence and communion with

the total soul of things. But the craving, when the mind is pent in to the hard facts, especially as science now reveals them, can breed pessimism, quite as easily as it breeds optimism when it inspires religious trust and fancy to wing their way to another and a better world.

That is why I call pessimism an essentially religious disease. The nightmare view of life has plenty of organic sources; but its great reflective source has at all times been the contradiction between the phenomena of nature and the craving of the heart to believe that behind nature there is a spirit whose expression nature is. What philosophers call “natural theology” has been one way of appeasing this craving; that poetry of nature in which our English literature is so rich has been another way. Now, suppose a mind of the latter of our two classes, whose imagination is pent in consequently, and who takes its facts “hard”; suppose it, moreover, to feel strongly the craving for communion, and yet to realize how desperately difficult it is to construe the scientific order of nature either theologically or poetically,—and what result *can* there be but inner discord and contradiction? Now, this inner discord (merely as discord) can be relieved in either of two ways: The longing to read the facts religiously may cease, and leave the bare facts by themselves; or, supplementary facts may be discovered or believed-in,

which permit the religious reading to go on. These two ways of relief are the two stages of recovery, the two levels of escape from pessimism, to which I made allusion a moment ago, and which the sequel will, I trust, make more clear.

### III.

Starting then with nature, we naturally tend, if we have the religious craving, to say with Marcus Aurelius, "O Universe! what thou wishest I wish." Our sacred books and traditions tell us of one God who made heaven and earth, and, looking on them, saw that they were good. Yet, on more intimate acquaintance, the visible surfaces of heaven and earth refuse to be brought by us into any intelligible unity at all. Every phenomenon that we would praise there exists cheek by jowl with some contrary phenomenon that cancels all its religious effect upon the mind. Beauty and hideousness, love and cruelty, life and death keep house together in indissoluble partnership; and there gradually steals over us, instead of the old warm notion of a man-loving Deity, that of an awful power that neither hates nor loves, but rolls all things together meaninglessly to a common doom. This is an uncanny, a sinister, a nightmare view of life, and its peculiar *Unheimlichkeit*, or poisonousness, lies expressly in

our holding two things together which cannot possibly agree,—in our clinging, on the one hand, to the demand that there shall be a living spirit of the whole; and, on the other, to the belief that the course of nature must be such a spirit's adequate manifestation and expression. It is in the contradiction between the supposed being of a spirit that encompasses and owns us, and with which we ought to have some communion, and the character of such a spirit as revealed by the visible world's course, that this particular death-in-life paradox and this melancholy-breeding puzzle reside. Carlyle expresses the result in that chapter of his immortal *Sartor Resartus* entitled "The Everlasting No." "I lived," writes poor Teufelsdröckh, "in a continual, indefinite, pining fear; tremulous, pusillanimous, apprehensive of I knew not what: it seemed as if all things in the heavens above and the earth beneath would hurt me; as if the heavens and the earth were but boundless jaws of a devouring monster, wherein I, palpitating, lay waiting to be devoured."

This is the first stage of speculative melancholy. No brute can have this sort of melancholy; no man who is irreligious can become its prey. It is the sick shudder of the frustrated religious demand, and not the mere necessary outcome of animal experience. Teufelsdröckh himself could have made shift to face the general chaos

and bedevilment of this world's experiences very well, were he not the victim of an originally unlimited trust and affection towards them. If he might meet them piecemeal, with no suspicion of any whole expressing itself in them, shunning the bitter parts and husbanding the sweet ones, as the occasion served, and as the day was foul or fair, he could have zigzagged toward an easy end, and felt no obligation to make the air vocal with his lamentations. The mood of levity, of "I don't care," is for this world's ills a sovereign and practical anaesthetic. But, no! something deep down in Teufelsdröckh and in the rest of us tells us that there *is* a Spirit in things to which we owe allegiance, and for whose sake we must keep up the serious mood. And so the inner fever and discord also are kept up; for nature taken on her visible surface reveals no such Spirit, and beyond the facts of nature we are at the present stage of our inquiry not supposing ourselves to look.

Now, I do not hesitate frankly and sincerely to confess to you that this real and genuine discord seems to me to carry with it the inevitable bankruptcy of natural religion naïvely and simply taken. There were times when Leibnitzes with their heads buried in monstrous wigs could compose Theodicies, and when stall-fed officials of an established church could prove by the valves in the heart and the round ligament of

the hip-joint the existence of a “Moral and Intelligent Contriver of the World.” But those times are past; and we of the nineteenth century, with our evolutionary theories and our mechanical philosophies, already know nature too impartially and too well to worship unreservedly any God of whose character she can be an adequate expression. Truly, all we know of good and duty proceeds from nature; but none the less so all we know of evil. Visible nature is all plasticity and indifference,—a moral multiverse, as one might call it, and not a moral universe. To such a harlot we owe no allegiance; with her as a whole we can establish no moral communion; and we are free in our dealings with her several parts to obey or destroy, and to follow no law but that of prudence in coming to terms with such other particular features as will help us to our private ends. If there be a divine Spirit of the universe, nature, such as we know her, cannot possibly be its *ultimate word* to man. Either there is no Spirit revealed in nature, or else it is inadequately revealed there; and (as all the higher religions have assumed) what we call visible nature, or this world, must be but a veil and surface-show whose full meaning resides in a supplementary unseen or *other* world.

I cannot help, therefore, accounting it on the whole a gain (though it may seem for certain poetic constitutions a very sad loss) that the naturalistic superstition,

the worship of the God of nature, simply taken as such, should have begun to loosen its hold upon the educated mind. In fact, if I am to express my personal opinion unreservedly, I should say (in spite of its sounding blasphemous at first to certain ears) that the initial step towards getting into healthy ultimate relations with the universe is the act of rebellion against the idea that such a God exists. . . .

We are familiar enough in this community with the spectacle of persons exulting in their emancipation from belief in the God of their ancestral Calvinism,—him who made the garden and the serpent, and pre-appointed the eternal fires of hell. Some of them have found humarer gods to worship, others are simply converts from all theology; but, both alike, they assure us that to have got rid of the sophistication of thinking they could feel any reverence or duty toward that impossible idol gave a tremendous happiness to their souls. Now, to make an idol of the spirit of nature, and worship it, also leads to sophistication; and in souls that are religious and would also be scientific the sophistication breeds a philosophical melancholy, from which the first natural step of escape is the denial of the idol; and with the downfall of the idol, whatever lack of positive joyousness may remain, there comes also the downfall of the whimpering and cowering mood. With evil simply taken as such, men

can make short work, for their relations with it then are only practical. It looms up no longer so spectrally, it loses all its haunting and perplexing significance, as soon as the mind attacks the instances of it singly, and ceases to worry about their derivation from the “one and only Power.”

Here, then, on this stage of mere emancipation from monistic superstition, the would-be suicide may already get encouraging answers to his question about the worth of life. There are in most men instinctive springs of vitality that respond healthily when the burden of metaphysical and infinite responsibility rolls off. The certainty that you now *may* step out of life whenever you please, and that to do so is not blasphemous or monstrous, is itself an immense relief. The thought of suicide is now no longer a guilty challenge and obsession.

“This little life is all we must endure;  
The grave’s most holy peace is ever sure,”—

says Thomson; adding, “I ponder these thoughts, and they comfort me.” Meanwhile we can always stand it for twenty-four hours longer, if only to see what tomorrow’s newspaper will contain, or what the next postman will bring.

But far deeper forces than this mere vital curiosity are arousable, even in the pessimistically-tending

mind; for where the loving and admiring impulses are dead, the hating and fighting impulses will still respond to fit appeals. This evil which we feel so deeply is something that we can also help to overthrow; for its sources, now that no "Substance" or "Spirit" is behind them, are finite, and we can deal with each of them in turn. It is, indeed, a remarkable fact that sufferings and hardships do not, as a rule, abate the love of life; they seem, on the contrary, usually to give it a keener zest. The sovereign source of melancholy is repletion. Need and struggle are what excite and inspire us; our hour of triumph is what brings the void. Not the Jews of the captivity, but those of the days of Solomon's glory are those from whom the pessimistic utterances in our Bible come. . . .

. . . Life is worth living, no matter what it bring, if only such combats may be carried to successful terminations and one's heel set on the tyrant's throat. To the suicide, then, in his supposed world of multifarious and immoral nature, you can appeal—and appeal in the name of the very evils that make his heart sick there—to wait and see *his* part of the battle out. And the consent to live on, which you ask of him under these circumstances, is not the sophistical "resignation" which devotees of cowering religions preach: it is not resignation in the sense of licking a despotic Deity's hand. It is, on the contrary, a resignation based

on manliness and pride. So long as your would-be suicide leaves an evil of his own unremedied, so long he has strictly no concern with evil in the abstract and at large. The submission which you demand of yourself to the general fact of evil in the world, your apparent acquiescence in it, is here nothing but the conviction that evil at large is *none of your business* until your business with your private particular evils is liquidated and settled up. A challenge of this sort, with proper designation of detail, is one that need only be made to be accepted by men whose normal instincts are not decayed; and your reflective would-be suicide may easily be moved by it to face life with a certain interest again. . . .

#### IV.

And now, in turning to what religion may have to say to the question, I come to what is the soul of my discourse. Religion has meant many things in human history; but when from now onward I use the word I mean to use it in the supernaturalist sense, as declaring that the so-called order of nature, which constitutes this world's experience, is only one portion of the total universe, and that there stretches beyond this visible world an unseen world of which we now know

nothing positive, but in its relation to which the true significance of our present mundane life consists. A man's religious faith (whatever more special items of doctrine it may involve) means for me essentially his faith in the existence of an unseen order of some kind in which the riddles of the natural order may be found explained. In the more developed religions the natural world has always been regarded as the mere scaffolding or vestibule of a truer, more eternal world, and affirmed to be a sphere of education, trial, or redemption. In these religions, one must in some fashion die to the natural life before one can enter into life eternal. The notion that this physical world of wind and water, where the sun rises and the moon sets, is absolutely and ultimately the divinely aimed-at and established thing, is one which we find only in very early religions, such as that of the most primitive Jews. It is this natural religion (primitive still, in spite of the fact that poets and men of science whose goodwill exceeds their perspicacity keep publishing it in new editions tuned to our contemporary ears) that, as I said a while ago, has suffered definitive bankruptcy in the opinion of a circle of persons, among whom I must count myself, and who are growing more numerous every day. For such persons the physical order of nature, taken simply as science knows it, cannot be

held to reveal any one harmonious spiritual intent. It is mere *weather*, as Chauncey Wright called it, doing and undoing without end.

Now, I wish to make you feel, if I can in the short remainder of this hour, that we have a right to believe the physical order to be only a partial order; that we have a right to supplement it by an unseen spiritual order which we assume on trust, if only thereby life may seem to us better worth living again. . . .

. . . What, in short, has authority to debar us from trusting our religious demands? Science as such assuredly has no authority, for she can only say what is, not what is not; and the agnostic “thou shalt not believe without coercive sensible evidence” is simply an expression (free to any one to make) of private personal appetite for evidence of a certain peculiar kind.

Now, when I speak of trusting our religious demands, just what do I mean by “trusting”? Is the word to carry with it license to define in detail an invisible world, and to anathematize and excommunicate those whose trust is different? Certainly not! Our faculties of belief were not primarily given us to make orthodoxies and heresies withal; they were given us to live by. And to trust our religious demands means first of all to live in the light of them, and to act as if the invisible world which they suggest were real. It is a fact of human nature, that men can live and die by the help

of a sort of faith that goes without a single dogma or definition. The bare assurance that this natural order is not ultimate but a mere sign or vision, the external staging of a many-storied universe, in which spiritual forces have the last word and are eternal,—this bare assurance is to such men enough to make life seem worth living in spite of every contrary presumption suggested by its circumstances on the natural plane. Destroy this inner assurance, however, vague as it is, and all the light and radiance of existence is extinguished for these persons at a stroke. Often enough the wild-eyed look at life—the suicidal mood—will then set in.

And now the application comes directly home to you and me. Probably to almost every one of us here the most adverse life would seem well worth living, if we only could be *certain* that our bravery and patience with it were terminating and eventuating and bearing fruit somewhere in an unseen spiritual world. But granting we are not certain, does it then follow that a bare trust in such a world is a fool's paradise and lubberland, or rather that it is a living attitude in which we are free to indulge? Well, we are free to trust at our own risks anything that is not impossible, and that can bring analogies to bear in its behalf. That the world of physics is probably not absolute, all the converging multitude of arguments that make in favor

of idealism tend to prove; and that our whole physical life may lie soaking in a spiritual atmosphere, a dimension of being that we at present have no organ for apprehending, is vividly suggested to us by the analogy of the life of our domestic animals. Our dogs, for example, are in our human life but not of it. They witness hourly the outward body of events whose inner meaning cannot, by any possible operation, be revealed to their intelligence,—events in which they themselves often play the cardinal part. My terrier bites a teasing boy, for example, and the father demands damages. The dog may be present at every step of the negotiations, and see the money paid, without an inkling of what it all means, without a suspicion that it has anything to do with *him*; and he never *can* know in his natural dog's life. Or take another case which used greatly to impress me in my medical-student days. Consider a poor dog whom they are vivisecting in a laboratory. He lies strapped on a board and shrieking at his executioners, and to his own dark consciousness is literally in a sort of hell. He cannot see a single redeeming ray in the whole business; and yet all these diabolical-seeming events are often controlled by human intentions with which, if his poor benighted mind could only be made to catch a glimpse of them, all that is heroic in him would religiously acquiesce. Healing truth, relief to future sufferings

of beast and man, are to be bought by them. It may be genuinely a process of redemption. Lying on his back on the board there he may be performing a function incalculably higher than any that prosperous canine life admits of; and yet, of the whole performance, this function is the one portion that must remain absolutely beyond his ken.

Now turn from this to the life of man. In the dog's life we see the world invisible to him because we live in both worlds. In human life, although we only see our world, and his within it, yet encompassing both these worlds a still wider world may be there, as unseen by us as our world is by him; and to believe in that world *may* be the most essential function that our lives in this world have to perform. But "*may be! may be!*" one now hears the positivist contemptuously exclaim; "*what use can a scientific life have for maybes?*" Well, I reply, the "*scientific*" life itself has much to do with maybes, and human life at large has everything to do with them. So far as man stands for anything, and is productive or originative at all, his entire vital function may be said to have to deal with maybes. Not a victory is gained, not a deed of faithfulness or courage is done, except upon a maybe; not a service, not a sally of generosity, not a scientific exploration or experiment or text-book, that may not be a mistake. It is only by risking our persons from

one hour to another that we live at all. And often enough our faith beforehand in an uncertified result *is the only thing that makes the result come true.* Suppose, for instance, that you are climbing a mountain, and have worked yourself into a position from which the only escape is by a terrible leap. Have faith that you can successfully make it, and your feet are nerved to its accomplishment. But mistrust yourself, and think of all the sweet things you have heard the scientists say of *maybes*, and you will hesitate so long that, at last, all unstrung and trembling, and launching yourself in a moment of despair, you roll in the abyss. In such a case (and it belongs to an enormous class), the part of wisdom as well as of courage is to *believe what is in the line of your needs*, for only by such belief is the need fulfilled. Refuse to believe, and you shall indeed be right, for you shall irretrievably perish. But believe, and again you shall be right, for you shall save yourself. You make one or the other of two possible universes true by your trust or mistrust,—both universes having been only *maybes*, in this particular, before you contributed your act.

Now, it appears to me that the question whether life is worth living is subject to conditions logically much like these. It does, indeed, depend on you *the liver.* If you surrender to the nightmare view and crown the evil edifice by your own suicide, you have

indeed made a picture totally black. Pessimism, completed by your act, is true beyond a doubt, so far as your world goes. Your mistrust of life has removed whatever worth your own enduring existence might have given to it; and now, throughout the whole sphere of possible influence of that existence, the mistrust has proved itself to have had divining power. But suppose, on the other hand, that instead of giving way to the nightmare view you cling to it that this world is not the *ultimatum*. Suppose you find yourself a very well-spring, as Wordsworth says, of—

“Zeal, and the virtue to exist by faith  
As soldiers live by courage; as, by strength  
Of heart, the sailor fights with roaring seas.”

Suppose, however thickly evils crowd upon you, that your unconquerable subjectivity proves to be their match, and that you find a more wonderful joy than any passive pleasure can bring in trusting ever in the larger whole. Have you not now made life worth living on these terms? What sort of a thing would life really be, with your qualities ready for a tussle with it, if it only brought fair weather and gave these higher faculties of yours no scope? Please remember that optimism and pessimism are definitions of the world, and that our own reactions on the world, small as they are in bulk, are integral parts of the whole thing,

and necessarily help to determine the definition. They may even be the decisive elements in determining the definition. A large mass can have its unstable equilibrium overturned by the addition of a feather's weight; a long phrase may have its sense reversed by the addition of the three letters n-o-t. This life is worth living, we can say, *since it is what we make it, from the moral point of view*; and we are determined to make it from that point of view, so far as we have anything to do with it, a success.

Now, in this description of faiths that verify themselves I have assumed that our faith in an invisible order is what inspires those efforts and that patience which make this visible order good for moral men. Our faith in the seen world's goodness (goodness now meaning fitness for successful moral and religious life) has verified itself by leaning on our faith in the unseen world. But will our faith in the unseen world similarly verify itself? Who knows?

Once more it is a case of *maybe*; and once more *maybes* are the essence of the situation. I confess that I do not see why the very existence of an invisible world may not in part depend on the personal response which any one of us may make to the religious appeal. God himself, in short, may draw vital strength and increase of very being from our fidelity.

For my own part, I do not know what the sweat and blood and tragedy of this life mean, if they mean anything short of this. If this life be not a real fight, in which something is eternally gained for the universe by success, it is no better than a game of private theatricals from which one may withdraw at will. But it *feels* like a real fight,—as if there were something really wild in the universe which we, with all our idealities and faithfulnesses, are needed to redeem; and first of all to redeem our own hearts from atheisms and fears. For such a half-wild, half-saved universe our nature is adapted. The deepest thing in our nature is this *Binnenleben* (as a German doctor lately has called it), this dumb region of the heart in which we dwell alone with our willingnesses and unwillingnesses, our faiths and fears. As through the cracks and crannies of caverns those waters exude from the earth's bosom which then form the fountain-heads of springs, so in these crepuscular depths of personality the sources of all our outer deeds and decisions take their rise. Here is our deepest organ of communication with the nature of things; and compared with these concrete movements of our soul all abstract statements and scientific arguments—the veto, for example, which the strict positivist pronounces upon our faith—sound to us like mere chatterings of the

teeth. For here possibilities, not finished facts, are the realities with which we have actively to deal. . . .

These, then, are my last words to you: Be not afraid of life. Believe that life *is* worth living, and your belief will help create the fact.

*Psychology and the  
Healthy Mind*





# 6

## “What Makes a Life Significant” (1900)

### INTRODUCTION

*James delivered the lecture “What Makes a Life Significant” at Harvard in 1900, but the speech came to him on the train ride home from Chautauqua, New York. Chautauqua is still home of one of the largest summer artist communities in the world, and each year men and women of leisure flock to this quaint community to participate in artistic performances and listen to luminaries wax eloquent about the meaning of life. It is an altogether pleasant affair, one with no friction, no controversy, and no altercation. On his way home, James also reflected that the gathering also had no life—which is the essential insight of his lecture. In our modern age it is tempting to think that a significant life is an easy or comfortable one. James heartily, almost violently, disagreed.*

*Instead he argued that human significance was found in a certain type of struggle: “The solid meaning of life is always the same eternal thing—the marriage,*

*namely, of some unhabitual ideal, however special, with some fidelity, courage, and endurance; with some man's or woman's pains.*" This position is not dissimilar from one expressed by James's Irving Street neighbor and philosophical colleague, Josiah Royce, who argues in his *Philosophy of Loyalty* (1900) that human meaning turns on loyalty, which Royce says is the willingness to sacrifice for a particular cause.

Similarly, James believed human value is derived from effort—and in most cases struggle—directed toward a particular end. It has little to do with the achievements of money or prestige and everything to do with what Cornel West once called the “non-market values like love, empathy, benevolence, and sacrifice for others.” These values, despite the joy associated with them, arise in the face of hardship (benevolence and sacrifice only occur when someone else is in trouble); James tried to remind his Harvard audience that it was not the point of life to make things as easy and painless as possible.

In conclusion, James states that human significance also turns on the feeling of “zest.” We think this is very important to remember. There is no one particular project, or even type of project, that can anchor the meaning of life. Whether something is actually meaningful or not is ultimately indicated by the feeling of

*“zest”—an energy and sense of liveliness at the core of an individual in the midst of activity or contemplation. “Zest” is a word with an unknown origin, but think about the last time that you said to yourself, “wow, that was really something!” That is probably something of the feeling of zest and, for James, the feeling of significance.*



A few summers ago I spent a happy week at the famous Assembly Grounds on the borders of Chautauqua Lake. The moment one treads that sacred enclosure, one feels one's self in an atmosphere of success. Sobriety and industry, intelligence and goodness, orderliness and ideality, prosperity and cheerfulness, pervade the air. It is a serious and studious picnic on a gigantic scale. Here you have a town of many thousands of inhabitants, beautifully laid out in the forest and drained, and equipped with means for satisfying all the necessary lower and most of the superfluous higher wants of man. You have a first-class college in full blast. You have magnificent music—a chorus of seven hundred voices, with possibly the most perfect open-air auditorium in the world. You have every sort of athletic exercise from sailing, rowing, swimming, bicycling, to the ball-field and the more artificial doings

which the gymnasium affords. You have kindergartens and model secondary schools. You have general religious services and special club-houses for the several sects. You have perpetually running soda-water fountains, and daily popular lectures by distinguished men. You have the best of company, and yet no effort. You have no zymotic diseases, no poverty, no drunkenness, no crime, no police. You have culture, you have kindness, you have cheapness, you have equality, you have the best fruits of what mankind has fought and bled and striven for under the name of civilization for centuries. You have, in short, a foretaste of what human society might be, were it all in the light, with no suffering and no dark corners.

I went in curiosity for a day. I stayed for a week, held spell-bound by the charm and ease of everything, by the middle-class paradise, without a sin, without a victim, without a blot, without a tear.

And yet what was my own astonishment, on emerging into the dark and wicked world again, to catch myself quite unexpectedly and involuntarily saying: “Ouf! what a relief! Now for something primordial and savage, even though it were as bad as an Armenian massacre, to set the balance straight again. This order is too tame, this culture too second-rate, this goodness too uninspiring. This human drama with-

out a villain or a pang; this community so refined that ice-cream soda-water is the utmost offering it can make to the brute animal in man; this city simmering in the tepid lakeside sun; this atrocious harmlessness of all things,—I cannot abide with them. Let me take my chances again in the big outside worldly wilderness with all its sins and sufferings. There are the heights and depths, the precipices and the steep ideals, the gleams of the awful and the infinite; and there is more hope and help a thousand times than in this dead level and quintessence of every mediocrity.”

Such was the sudden right-about-face performed for me by my lawless fancy! There had been spread before me the realization—on a small, sample scale of course—of all the ideals for which our civilization has been striving: security, intelligence, humanity, and order; and here was the instinctive hostile reaction, not of the natural man, but of a so-called cultivated man upon such a Utopia. There seemed thus to be a self-contradiction and paradox somewhere, which I, as a professor drawing a full salary, was in duty bound to unravel and explain, if I could.

So I meditated. And, first of all, I asked myself what the thing was that was so lacking in this Sabbatical city, and the lack of which kept one forever falling short of the higher sort of contentment. And I soon recognized that it was the element that gives to the

wicked outer world all its moral style, expressiveness and picturesqueness,—the element of precipitousness, so to call it, of strength and strenuousness, intensity and danger.

What excites and interests the looker-on at life, what the romances and the statues celebrate and the grim civic monuments remind us of, is the everlasting battle of the powers of light with those of darkness; with heroism, reduced to its bare chance, yet ever and anon snatching victory from the jaws of death. But in this unspeakable Chautauqua there was no potentiality of death in sight anywhere, and no point of the compass visible from which danger might possibly appear. The ideal was so completely victorious already that no sign of any previous battle remained, the place just resting on its oars. But what our human emotions seem to require is the sight of the struggle going on. The moment the fruits are being merely eaten, things become ignoble. Sweat and effort, human nature strained to its uttermost and on the rack, yet getting through alive, and then turning its back on its success to pursue another more rare and arduous still—this is the sort of thing the presence of which inspires us, and the reality of which it seems to be the function of all the higher forms of literature and fine art to bring home to us and suggest. At Chautauqua there were no racks, even in the place's historical

museum; and no sweat, except possibly the gentle moisture on the brow of some lecturer, or on the sides of some player in the ball-field.

Such absence of human nature *in extremis* anywhere seemed, then, a sufficient explanation for Chautauqua's flatness and lack of zest.

But was not this a paradox well calculated to fill one with dismay? It looks indeed, thought I, as if the romantic idealists with their pessimism about our civilization were, after all, quite right. An irremediable flatness is coming over the world. Bourgeoisie and mediocrity, church sociables and teachers' conventions, are taking the place of the old heights and depths and romantic chiaroscuro. And, to get human life in its wild intensity, we must in future turn more and more away from the actual, and forget it, if we can, in the romancer's or the poet's pages. The whole world, delightful and sinful as it may still appear for a moment to one just escaped from the Chautauquan enclosure, is nevertheless obeying more and more just those ideals that are sure to make of it in the end a mere Chautauqua Assembly on an enormous scale. . . .

With these thoughts in my mind, I was speeding with the train toward Buffalo, when, near that city, the sight of a workman doing something on the dizzy edge of a sky-scaling iron construction brought me to my senses very suddenly. And now I perceived, by a

flash of insight, that I had been steeping myself in pure ancestral blindness, and looking at life with the eyes of a remote spectator. Wishing for heroism and the spectacle of human nature on the rack, I had never noticed the great fields of heroism lying round about me, I had failed to see it present and alive. I could only think of it as dead and embalmed, labelled and costumed, as it is in the pages of romance. And yet there it was before me in the daily lives of the laboring classes. Not in clanging fights and desperate marches only is heroism to be looked for, but on every railway bridge and fire-proof building that is going up to-day. On freight-trains, on the decks of vessels, in cattle-yards and mines, on lumber-rafts, among the firemen and the policemen, the demand for courage is incessant; and the supply never fails. There, every day of the year somewhere, is human nature *in extremis* for you. And wherever a scythe, an axe, a pick, or a shovel is wielded, you have it sweating and aching and with its powers of patient endurance racked to the utmost under the length of hours of the strain.

As I awoke to all this unidealized heroic life around me, the scales seemed to fall from my eyes; and a wave of sympathy greater than anything I had ever before felt with the common life of common men began to fill my soul. It began to seem as if virtue with horny hands and dirty skin were the only virtue genuine and vital enough to take account of. Every other virtue

poses; none is absolutely unconscious and simple, and unexpectant of decoration or recognition, like this. These are our soldiers, thought I, these our sustainers, these the very parents of our life. . . .

If any of you have been readers of Tolstoï, you will see that I passed into a vein of feeling similar to his, with its abhorrence of all that conventionally passes for distinguished, and its exclusive deification of the bravery, patience, kindliness, and dumbness of the unconscious natural man.

Where now is *our* Tolstoï, I said, to bring the truth of all this home to our American bosoms, fill us with a better insight, and wean us away from that spurious literary romanticism on which our wretched culture—as it calls itself—is fed? Divinity lies all about us, and culture is too hidebound to even suspect the fact. Could a Howells or a Kipling be enlisted in this mission? or are they still too deep in the ancestral blindness, and not humane enough for the inner joy and meaning of the laborer's existence to be really revealed? Must we wait for some one born and bred and living as a laborer himself, but who, by grace of Heaven, shall also find a literary voice? . . .

“The more,” writes Tolstoï in the work *My Confession*,

the more I examined the life of these laboring folks,  
the more persuaded I became that they veritably have

faith, and get from it alone the sense and the possibility of life. . . . Contrariwise to those of our own class, who protest against destiny and grow indignant at its rigor, these people receive maladies and misfortunes without revolt, without opposition, and with a firm and tranquil confidence that all had to be like that, could not be otherwise, and that it is all right so. . . . The more we live by our intellect, the less we understand the meaning of life. We see only a cruel jest in suffering and death, whereas these people live, suffer, and draw near to death with tranquillity, and oftener than not with joy. . . . There are enormous multitudes of them happy with the most perfect happiness, although deprived of what for us is the sole good of life. Those who understand life's meaning, and know how to live and die thus, are to be counted not by twos, threes, tens, but by hundreds, thousands, millions. They labor quietly, endure privations and pains, live and die, and throughout everything see the good without seeing the vanity. I had to love these people. The more I entered into their life, the more I loved them; and the more it became possible for me to live, too. . . .

Just test Tolstoi's deification of the mere manual laborer by the facts. This is what Mr. Walter Wyckoff, after working as an unskilled laborer in the demoli-

tion of some buildings at West Point, writes of the spiritual condition of the class of men to which he temporarily chose to belong:—

The salient features of our condition are plain enough. We are grown men, and are without a trade. In the labor-market we stand ready to sell to the highest bidder our mere muscular strength for so many hours each day. We are thus in the lowest grade of labor. And, selling our muscular strength in the open market for what it will bring, we sell it under peculiar conditions. It is all the capital that we have. We have no reserve means of subsistence, and cannot, therefore, stand off for a "reserve price." We sell under the necessity of satisfying imminent hunger. Broadly speaking, we must sell our labor or starve; and, as hunger is a matter of a few hours, and we have no other way of meeting this need, we must sell at once for what the market offers for our labor.

And being what we are, the dregs of the labor-market, and having no certainty of permanent employment, and no organization among ourselves, we must expect to work under the watchful eye of a gang-boss, and be driven, like the wage-slaves that we are, through our tasks.

All this is to tell us, in effect, that our lives are hard, barren, hopeless lives.

And such bard [*sic*], barren, hopeless lives, surely, are not lives in which one ought to be willing permanently to remain. And why is this so? Is it because they are so dirty? Well, Nansen grew a great deal dirtier on his polar expedition; and we think none the worse of his life for that. Is it the insensibility? Our soldiers have to grow vastly more insensible, and we extol them to the skies. Is it the poverty? Poverty has been reckoned the crowning beauty of many a heroic career. Is it the slavery to a task, the loss of finer pleasures? Such slavery and loss are of the very essence of the higher fortitude, and are always counted to its credit,—read the records of missionary devotion all over the world. It is not any one of these things, then, taken by itself,—no, nor all of them together,—that make such a life undesirable. A man might in truth live like an unskilled laborer, and do the work of one, and yet count as one of the noblest of God's creatures. Quite possibly there were some such persons in the gang that our author describes; but the current of their souls ran underground; and he was too steeped in the ancestral blindness to discern it.

If there *were* any such morally exceptional individuals, however, what made them different from the rest? It can only have been this,—that their souls worked and endured in obedience to some inner *ideal*, while their comrades were not actuated by anything

worthy of that name. These ideals of other lives are among those secrets that we can almost never penetrate, although something about the man may often tell us when they are there. . . .

A rugged, barren land [says Phillips Brooks] is poverty to live in,—a land where I am thankful very often if I can get a berry or a root to eat. But living in it really, letting it bear witness to me of itself, not disdaining it all the time by judging it after the standard of the other lands, gradually there come out its qualities. Behold! no land like this barren and naked land of poverty could show the moral geology of the world. See how the hard ribs . . . stand out strong and solid. No life like poverty could so get one to the heart of things and make men know their meaning, could so let us feel life and the world with all the soft cushions stripped off and thrown away. . . . Poverty makes men come very near each other, and recognize each other's human hearts; and poverty, highest and best of all, demands and cries out for faith in God. . . . I know how superficial and unfeeling, how like mere mockery, words in praise of poverty may seem. . . . But I am sure that the poor man's dignity and freedom, his self-respect and energy, depend upon his cordial knowledge that his poverty is a true region and kind of life, with its own chances of character,

its own springs of happiness and revelations of God. Let him resist the characterlessness which often goes with being poor. Let him insist on respecting the condition where he lives. Let him learn to love it, so that by and by, [if] he grows rich, he shall go out of the low door of the old familiar poverty with a true pang of regret, and with a true honor for the narrow home in which he has lived so long.

The barrenness and ignobleness of the more usual laborer's life consist in the fact that it is moved by no such ideal inner springs. The backache, the long hours, the danger, are patiently endured—for what? To gain a quid of tobacco, a glass of beer, a cup of coffee, a meal, and a bed, and to begin again the next day and shirk as much as one can. This really is why we raise no monument to the laborers in the Subway, even though they be our conscripts, and even though after a fashion our city is indeed based upon their patient hearts and enduring backs and shoulders. And this is why we do raise monuments to our soldiers, whose outward conditions were even brutaller still. The soldiers are supposed to have followed an ideal, and the laborers are supposed to have followed none.

You see, my friends, how the plot now thickens; and how strangely the complexities of this wonderful human nature of ours begin to develop under our

hands. We have seen the blindness and deadness to each other which are our natural inheritance; and, in spite of them, we have been led to acknowledge an inner meaning which passeth show, and which may be present in the lives of others where we least descry it. And now we are led to say that such inner meaning can be *complete* and *valid for us also*, only when the inner joy, courage, and endurance are joined with an ideal. . . .

The significance of a human life for communicable and publicly recognizable purposes is thus the offspring of a marriage of two different parents, either of whom alone is barren. The ideals taken by themselves give no reality, the virtues by themselves no novelty. And let the orientalists and pessimists say what they will, the thing of deepest—or, at any rate, of comparatively deepest—significance in life does seem to be its character of *progress*, or that strange union of reality with ideal novelty which it continues from one moment to another to present. To recognize ideal novelty is the task of what we call intelligence. Not every one's intelligence can tell which novelties are ideal. For many the ideal thing will always seem to cling still to the older more familiar good. In this case character, though not significant totally, may be still significant pathetically. So, if we are to choose which is the more essential factor of human character,

the fighting virtue or the intellectual breadth, we must side with Tolstoi, and choose that simple faithfulness to his light or darkness which any common unintellectual man can show.

But, with all this beating and tacking on my part, I fear you take me to be reaching a confused result. I seem to be just taking things up and dropping them again. First I took up Chautauqua, and dropped that; then Tolstoi and the heroism of common toil, and dropped them; finally, I took up ideals, and seem now almost dropping those. But please observe in what sense it is that I drop them. It is when they pretend *singly* to redeem life from insignificance. Culture and refinement all alone are not enough to do so. Ideal aspirations are not enough, when uncombined with pluck and will. But neither are pluck and will, dogged endurance and insensibility to danger enough, when taken all alone. There must be some sort of fusion, some chemical combination among these principles, for a life objectively and thoroughly significant to result. . . .

To show the sort of thing I mean by these words, I will just make one brief practical illustration and then close.

We are suffering to-day in America from what is called the labor-question; and, when you go out into the world, you will each and all of you be caught up

in its perplexities. I use the brief term labor-question to cover all sorts of anarchistic discontents and socialistic projects, and the conservative resistances which they provoke. So far as this conflict is unhealthy and regrettable,—and I think it is so only to a limited extent,—the unhealthiness consists solely in the fact that one-half of our fellow-countrymen remain entirely blind to the internal significance of the lives of the other half. They miss the joys and sorrows, they fail to feel the moral virtue, and they do not guess the presence of the intellectual ideals. They are at cross-purposes all along the line, regarding each other as they might regard a set of dangerously gesticulating automata, or, if they seek to get at the inner motivation, making the most horrible mistakes. Often all that the poor man can think of in the rich man is a cowardly greediness for safety, luxury, and effeminacy, and a boundless affectation. What he is, is not a human being, but a pocket-book, a bank-account. And a similar greediness, turned by disappointment into envy, is all that many rich men can see in the state of mind of the dissatisfied poor. And, if the rich man begins to do the sentimental act over the poor man, what senseless blunders does he make, pitying him for just those very duties and those very immunities which, rightly taken, are the condition of his most abiding and characteristic joys! Each, in short, ignores

the fact that happiness and unhappiness and significance are a vital mystery; each pins them absolutely on some ridiculous feature of the external situation; and everybody remains outside of everybody else's sight.

Society has, with all this, undoubtedly got to pass toward some newer and better equilibrium, and the distribution of wealth has doubtless slowly got to change: such changes have always happened, and will happen to the end of time. But if, after all that I have said, any of you expect that they will make any *genuine vital difference* on a large scale, to the lives of our descendants, you will have missed the significance of my entire lecture. The solid meaning of life is always the same eternal thing,—the marriage, namely, of some unhabitual ideal, however special, with some fidelity, courage, and endurance; with some man's or woman's pains.—And, whatever or wherever life may be, there will always be the chance for that marriage to take place. . . .

I am speaking broadly, I know, and omitting to consider certain qualifications in which I myself believe. But one can only make one point in one lecture, and I shall be well content if I have brought my point home to you this evening in even a slight degree. *There are compensations:* and no outward changes of condition in life can keep the nightingale of its eternal

meaning from singing in all sorts of different men's hearts. That is the main fact to remember. If we could not only admit it with our lips, but really and truly believe it, how our convulsive insistencies, how our antipathies and dreads of each other, would soften down! If the poor and the rich could look at each other in this way, *sub specie æternatis*, how gentle would grow their disputes! what tolerance and good humor, what willingness to live and let live, would come into the world!

# 7

## Chapter IX, “The Stream of Thought,” and Chapter X, “The Consciousness of Self,” from *The Principles of Psychology* (1890)

### INTRODUCTION

James's *The Principles of Psychology*, published in 1890, is so complex and vast that it is very difficult to give a sense of the work as a whole by providing just a few short selections. In its weighty two volumes, the *Principles* attempts to provide a comprehensive overview of the human nervous system, a revised conception of habit, a novel theory of the self, an articulation of perception and thought, and an original framing of the emotions. The selections presented below capture two of the essential insights of the *Principles*: James's famous description of “the stream of consciousness” and his explanation of selfhood. It is easy to understand these passages as important philosophical interventions in epistemology and

*metaphysics—because they are—but we tend to think of them in more existential terms, as ways to reimagine and rework ourselves.*

*From his teenage years as an aspiring artist, James was a student of consciousness. He followed his godfather, the transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, in believing that “Experience is our only teacher, and we get his lesson indifferently in any school.” And like Emerson, James held that experience, and therefore consciousness, takes a variety of forms and is continually changing. Consciousness ebbs and flows—like a river. Today, this idea is rather commonplace, but when the Principles was published, philosophers tended to think about consciousness and thought in a very different way. The dominant model in the early nineteenth century was largely that of the modern empiricists, particularly David Hume, who held that consciousness consisted of a series of discrete impressions on the mind. Things come to mind, as Elbert Hubbard once said, “one damn thing after another.”*

*James’s key insight at the end of the century was that human consciousness is complex, active, embodied, changing, and continuous. Why is this existentially significant? James believed that it was possible to attend to the various shifts of consciousness and control them to varying degrees. You will recall his*

*advice to a depressed Thomas Wren Ward to remember that humans have “a capacity for pleasure and pain of different kinds.” Similarly, human beings have some say over their conscious lives, to negotiate the river of thought in unique and meaningful ways.*

*The second selection expresses James’s mature view of human selfhood. What am I really talking about when I talk about “myself”? James suggests that instead of possessing a single unitary self, individuals experience a variety of components: the material self, the social self, the spiritual self, and the pure ego. One of the most interesting aspects of this rendering is the way that James creates the space for friction between the various selves. As his hero Walt Whitman once said, “I contain multitudes.”*



## CHAPTER IX: THE STREAM OF THOUGHT

We now begin our study of the mind from within. Most books start with sensations, as the simplest mental facts, and proceed synthetically, constructing each higher stage from those below it. But this is abandoning the empirical method of investigation. No one ever had a simple sensation by itself. Consciousness, from our natal day, is of a teeming multi-

plicity of objects and relations, and what we call simple sensations are results of discriminative attention, pushed often to a very high degree. It is astonishing what havoc is wrought in psychology by admitting at the outset apparently innocent suppositions, that nevertheless contain a flaw. The bad consequences develop themselves later on, and are irremediable, being woven through the whole texture of the work. The notion that sensations, being the simplest things, are the first things to take up in psychology is one of these suppositions. The only thing which psychology has a right to postulate at the outset is the fact of thinking itself, and that must first be taken up and analyzed. If sensations then prove to be amongst the elements of the thinking, we shall be no worse off as respects them than if we had taken them for granted at the start.

*The first fact for us, then, as psychologists, is that thinking of some sort goes on.* I use the word thinking . . . for every form of consciousness indiscriminately. . . .

### *Thought is in Constant Change.*

I do not mean necessarily that no one state of mind has any duration—even if true, that would be hard to establish. The change which I have more particularly in view is that which takes place in sensible intervals

of time; and the result on which I wish to lay stress is this, that *no state once gone can recur and be identical with what it was before*. Let us begin with Mr. Shadworth Hodgson's description:

I go straight to the facts, without saying I go to perception, or sensation, or thought, or any special mode at all. What I find when I look at my consciousness at all is that what I cannot divest myself of, or not have in consciousness, if I have any consciousness at all, is a sequence of different feelings. I may shut my eyes and keep perfectly still, and try not to contribute anything of my own will; but whether I think or do not think, whether I perceive external things or not, I always have a succession of different feelings. Anything else that I may have also, of a more special character, comes in as parts of this succession. Not to have the succession of different feelings is not to be conscious at all. . . . The chain of consciousness is a sequence of differents.

Such a description as this can awaken no possible protest from any one. We all recognize as different great classes of our conscious states. Now we are seeing, now hearing; now reasoning, now willing; now recollecting, now expecting; now loving, now hating; and in a hundred other ways we know our minds to be alternately engaged. But all these are complex

states. The aim of science is always to reduce complexity to simplicity; and in psychological science we have the celebrated “theory of *ideas*” which, admitting the great difference among each other of what may be called concrete conditions of mind, seeks to show how this is all the resultant effect of variations in the *combination* of certain simple elements of consciousness that always remain the same. These mental atoms or molecules are what Locke called “simple ideas.” Some of Locke’s successors made out that the only simple ideas were the sensations strictly so called. Which ideas the simple ones may be does not, however, now concern us. It is enough that certain philosophers have thought they could see under the dissolving-view-appearance of the mind elementary facts of *any* sort that remained unchanged amid the flow.

And the view of these philosophers has been called little into question, for our common experience seems at first sight to corroborate it entirely. Are not the sensations we get from the same object, for example, always the same? Does not the same piano-key, struck with the same force, make us hear in the same way? Does not the same grass give us the same feeling of green, the same sky the same feeling of blue, and do we not get the same olfactory sensation no matter how many times we put our nose to the same flask of

cologne? It seems a piece of metaphysical sophistry to suggest that we do not; and yet a close attention to the matter shows that *there is no proof that the same bodily sensation is ever got by us twice.*

*What is got twice is the same OBJECT.* We hear the same *note* over and over again; we see the same *quality* of green, or smell the same objective perfume, or experience the same *species* of pain. The realities, concrete and abstract, physical and ideal, whose permanent existence we believe in, seem to be constantly coming up again before our thought, and lead us, in our carelessness, to suppose that our “ideas” of them are the same ideas. When we come, some time later, to the chapter on Perception, we shall see how inveterate is our habit of not attending to sensations as subjective facts, but of simply using them as stepping-stones to pass over to the recognition of the realities whose presence they reveal. The grass out of the window now looks to me of the same green in the sun as in the shade, and yet a painter would have to paint one part of it dark brown, another part bright yellow, to give its real, sensational effect. We take no heed, as a rule, of the different way in which the same things look and sound and smell at different distances and under different circumstances. The sameness of the *things* is what we are concerned to ascertain; and any sensations that assure us of that will probably be con-

sidered in a rough way to be the same with each other. This is what makes off-hand testimony about the subjective identity of different sensations well-nigh worthless as a proof of the fact. The entire history of Sensation is a commentary on our inability to tell whether two sensations received apart are exactly alike. What appeals to our attention far more than the absolute quality or quantity of a given sensation is its *ratio* to whatever other sensations we may have at the same time. When everything is dark a somewhat less dark sensation makes us see an object white. Helmholtz calculates that the white marble painted in a picture representing an architectural view by moonlight is, when seen by daylight, from ten to twenty thousand times brighter than the real moonlit marble would be.

Such a difference as this could never have been *sensibly* learned; it had to be inferred from a series of indirect considerations. There are facts which make us believe that our sensibility is altering all the time, so that the same object cannot easily give us the same sensation over again. The eye's sensibility to light is at its maximum when the eye is first exposed, and blunts itself with surprising rapidity. A long night's sleep will make it see things twice as brightly on awakening, as simple rest by closure will make it see them later in the day. We feel things differently according

as we are sleepy or awake, hungry or full, fresh or tired; differently at night and in the morning, differently in summer and in winter, and above all things differently in childhood, manhood, and old age. Yet we never doubt that our feelings reveal the same world, with the same sensible qualities and the same sensible things occupying it. The difference of the sensibility is shown best by the difference of our emotion about the things from one age to another, or when we are in different organic moods. What was bright and exciting becomes weary, flat, and unprofitable. The bird's song is tedious, the breeze is mournful, the sky is sad.

To these indirect presumptions that our sensations, following the mutations of our capacity for feeling, are always undergoing an essential change, must be added another presumption, based on what must happen in the brain. Every sensation corresponds to some cerebral action. For an identical sensation to recur it would have to occur the second time *in an unmodified brain*. But as this, strictly speaking, is a physiological impossibility, so is an unmodified feeling an impossibility; for to every brain-modification, however small, must correspond a change of equal amount in the feeling which the brain subserves.

All this would be true if even sensations came to us pure and single and not combined into "things."

Even then we should have to confess that, however we might in ordinary conversation speak of getting the same sensation again, we never in strict theoretic accuracy could do so; and that whatever was true of the river of life, of the river of elementary feeling, it would certainly be true to say, like Heraclitus, that we never descend twice into the same stream.

But if the assumption of “simple ideas of sensation” recurring in immutable shape is so easily shown to be baseless, how much more baseless is the assumption of immutability in the larger masses of our thought!

For there it is obvious and palpable that our state of mind is never precisely the same. Every thought we have of a given fact is, strictly speaking, unique, and only bears a resemblance of kind with our other thoughts of the same fact. When the identical fact recurs, we *must* think of it in a fresh manner, see it under a somewhat different angle, apprehend it in different relations from those in which it last appeared. And the thought by which we cognize it is the thought of it-in-those-relations, a thought suffused with the consciousness of all that dim context. Often we are ourselves struck at the strange differences in our successive views of the same thing. We wonder how we ever could have opined as we did last month about a certain matter. We have outgrown the possibility of

that state of mind, we know not how. From one year to another we see things in new lights. . . .

But what here strikes us so forcibly on the flagrant scale exists on every scale, down to the imperceptible transition from one hour's outlook to that of the next. Experience is remoulding us every moment, and our mental reaction on every given thing is really a resultant of our experience of the whole world up to that date. The analogies of brain-physiology must again be appealed to to corroborate our view.

Our earlier chapters have taught us to believe that, whilst we think, our brain changes, and that, like the aurora borealis, its whole internal equilibrium shifts with every pulse of change. The precise nature of the shifting at a given moment is a product of many factors. The accidental state of local nutrition or blood-supply may be among them. But just as one of them certainly is the influence of outward objects on the sense-organs during the moment, so is another certainly the very special susceptibility in which the organ has been left at that moment by all it has gone through in the past. Every brain-state is partly determined by the nature of this entire past succession. Alter the latter in any part, and the brain-state must be somewhat different. Each present brain-state is a record in which the eye of Omniscience might read all the foregone history of its owner. It is out of the question, then, that any total brain-state should iden-

tically recur. Something like it may recur; but to suppose *it* to recur would be equivalent to the absurd admission that all the states that had intervened between its two appearances had been pure nonentities, and that the organ after their passage was exactly as it was before. And (to consider shorter periods) just as, in the senses, an impression feels very differently according to what has preceded it; as one color succeeding another is modified by the contrast, silence sounds delicious after noise, and a note, when the scale is sung up, sounds unlike itself when the scale is sung down; as the presence of certain lines in a figure changes the apparent form of the other lines, and as in music the whole æsthetic effect comes from the manner in which one set of sounds alters our feeling of another; so, in thought, we must admit that those portions of the brain that have just been maximally excited retain a kind of soreness which is a condition of our present consciousness, a codeterminant of how and what we now shall feel.

Ever some tracts [James refers here to continuous neurological structures, e.g., nerve bundles] are wanting in tension, some waxing, whilst others actively discharge. The states of tension have as positive an influence as any in determining the total condition, and in deciding what the *psychosis* shall be. All we know of submaximal nerve-irritations, and of the summation of apparently ineffective stimuli, tends to

show that *no* changes in the brain are physiologically ineffective, and that presumably none are bare of psychological result. But as the brain-tension shifts from one relative state of equilibrium to another, like the gyrations of a kaleidoscope, now rapid and now slow, is it likely that its faithful psychic concomitant is heavier-footed than itself, and that it cannot match each one of the organ's irradiations by a shifting inward iridescence of its own? But if it can do this, its inward iridescences must be infinite, for the brain-redistributions are in infinite variety. If so coarse a thing as a telephone-plate can be made to thrill for years and never reduplicate its inward condition, how much more must this be the case with the infinitely delicate brain?

I am sure that this concrete and total manner of regarding the mind's changes is the only true manner, difficult as it may be to carry it out in detail. If anything seems obscure about it, it will grow clearer as we advance. . . .

*Within each personal consciousness,  
thought is sensibly continuous.*

I can only define "continuous" as that which is without breach, crack, or division. I have already said that the breach from one mind to another is perhaps the

greatest breach in nature. The only breaches that can well be conceived to occur within the limits of a single mind would either be *interruptions*, *time-gaps* during which the consciousness went out altogether to come into existence again at a later moment; or they would be breaks in the *quality*, or content, of the thought, so abrupt that the segment that followed had no connection whatever with the one that went before. The proposition that within each personal consciousness thought feels continuous, means two things:

1. That even where there is a time-gap the consciousness after it feels as if it belonged together with the consciousness before it, as another part of the same self;
2. That the changes from one moment to another in the quality of the consciousness are never absolutely abrupt.

The case of the time-gaps, as the simplest, shall be taken first. And first of all a word about time-gaps of which the consciousness may not be itself aware. [In an earlier chapter] we saw that such time-gaps existed, and that they might be more numerous than is usually supposed. If the consciousness is not aware of them, it cannot feel them as interruptions. In the unconsciousness produced by nitrous oxide and other

anæsthetics, in that of epilepsy and fainting, the broken edges of the sentient life may meet and merge over the gap, much as the feelings of space of the opposite margins of the “blind spot” meet and merge over that objective interruption to the sensitiveness of the eye. Such consciousness as this, whatever it be for the on-looking psychologist, is for itself unbroken. It *feels* unbroken; a waking day of it is sensibly a unit as long as that day lasts, in the sense in which the hours themselves are units, as having all their parts next each other, with no intrusive alien substance between. To expect the consciousness to feel the interruptions of its objective continuity as gaps, would be like expecting the eye to feel a gap of silence because it does not hear, or the ear to feel a gap of darkness because it does not see. So much for the gaps that are unfelt.

With the felt gaps the case is different. On waking from sleep, we usually know that we have been unconscious, and we often have an accurate judgment of how long. The judgment here is certainly an inference from sensible signs, and its ease is due to long practice in the particular field. The result of it, however, is that the consciousness is, for itself, not what it was in the former case, but interrupted and discontinuous, in the mere sense of the words. But in the other sense of continuity, the sense of the parts being inwardly connected and belonging together because

they are parts of a common whole, the consciousness remains sensibly continuous and one. What now is the common whole? The natural name for it is *myself, I, or me.*

When Paul and Peter wake up in the same bed, and recognize that they have been asleep, each one of them mentally reaches back and makes connection with but *one* of the two streams of thought which were broken by the sleeping hours. As the current of an electrode buried in the ground unerringly finds its way to its own similarly buried mate, across no matter how much intervening earth; so Peter's present instantly finds out Peter's past, and never by mistake knits itself on to that of Paul. Paul's thought in turn is as little liable to go astray. The past thought of Peter is appropriated by the present Peter alone. He may have a *knowledge*, and a correct one too, of what Paul's last drowsy states of mind were as he sank into sleep, but it is an entirely different sort of knowledge from that which he has of his own last states. He *remembers* his own states, whilst he only *conceives* Paul's. Remembrance is like direct feeling; its object is suffused with a warmth and intimacy to which no object of mere conception ever attains. This quality of warmth and intimacy and immediacy is what Peter's *present* thought also possesses for itself. So sure as this present is me, is mine, it says, so sure is anything else that

comes with the same warmth and intimacy and immediacy, me and mine. What the qualities called warmth and intimacy may in themselves be will have to be matter for future consideration. But whatever past feelings appear with those qualities must be admitted to receive the greeting of the present mental state, to be owned by it, and accepted as belonging together with it in a common self. This community of self is what the time-gap cannot break in twain, and is why a present thought, although not ignorant of the time-gap, can still regard itself as continuous with certain chosen portions of the past.

Consciousness, then, does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as “chain” or “train” do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A “river” or a “stream” are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. *In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life.*

But now there appears, even within the limits of the same self, and between thoughts all of which alike have this same sense of belonging together, a kind of jointing and separateness among the parts, of which this statement seems to take no account. I refer to the breaks that are produced by sudden *contrasts in the quality* of the successive segments of the stream of

thought. If the words “chain” and “train” had no natural fitness in them, how came such words to be used at all? Does not a loud explosion rend the consciousness upon which it abruptly breaks, in twain? Does not every sudden shock, appearance of a new object, or change in a sensation, create a real interruption, sensibly felt as such, which cuts the conscious stream across at the moment at which it appears? Do not such interruptions smite us every hour of our lives, and have we the right, in their presence, still to call our consciousness a continuous stream?

This objection is based partly on a confusion and partly on a superficial introspective view.

The confusion is between the thoughts themselves, taken as subjective facts, and the things of which they are aware. It is natural to make this confusion, but easy to avoid it when once put on one’s guard. The things are discrete and discontinuous; they do pass before us in a train or chain, making often explosive appearances and rending each other in twain. But their comings and goings and contrasts no more break the flow of the thought that thinks them than they break the time and the space in which they lie. A silence may be broken by a thunder-clap, and we may be so stunned and confused for a moment by the shock as to give no instant account to ourselves of what has happened. But that very confusion is a

mental state, and a state that passes us straight over from the silence to the sound. The transition between the thought of one object and the thought of another is no more a break in the *thought* than a joint in a bamboo is a break in the wood. It is a part of the consciousness as much as the joint is a part of the *bamboo*.

The superficial introspective view is the overlooking, even when the things are contrasted with each other most violently, of the large amount of affinity that may still remain between the thoughts by whose means they are cognized. Into the awareness of the thunder itself the awareness of the previous silence creeps and continues; for what we hear when the thunder crashes is not thunder *pure*, but thunder-breaking-upon-silence-and-contrasting-with-it. Our feeling of the same objective thunder, coming in this way, is quite different from what it would be were the thunder a continuation of previous thunder. The thunder itself we believe to abolish and exclude the silence; but the *feeling* of the thunder is also a feeling of the silence as just gone; and it would be difficult to find in the actual concrete consciousness of man a feeling so limited to the present as not to have an inkling of anything that went before. Here, again, language works against our perception of the truth. We name our thoughts simply, each after its thing, as if each knew its own thing

and nothing else. What each really knows is clearly the thing it is named for, with dimly perhaps a thousand other things. It ought to be named after all of them, but it never is. Some of them are always things known a moment ago more clearly; others are things to be known more clearly a moment hence. Our own bodily position, attitude, condition, is one of the things of which *some* awareness, however inattentive, invariably accompanies the knowledge of whatever else we know. We think; and as we think we feel our bodily selves as the seat of the thinking. If the thinking be *our* thinking, it must be suffused through all its parts with that peculiar warmth and intimacy that make it come as ours. Whether the warmth and intimacy be anything more than the feeling of the same old body always there, is a matter for the next chapter to decide. *Whatever* the content of the ego may be, it is habitually felt *with* everything else by us humans, and must form a *liaison* between all the things of which we become successively aware.

On this gradualness in the changes of our mental content the principles of nerve-action can throw some more light. When studying, in Chapter III, the summation of nervous activities, we saw that no state of the brain can be supposed instantly to die away. If a new state comes, the inertia of the old state will still be there and modify the result accordingly. Of course

we cannot tell, in our ignorance, what in each instance the modifications ought to be. The commonest modifications in sense-perception are known as the phenomena of contrast. In æsthetics they are the feelings of delight or displeasure which certain particular orders in a series of impressions give. In thought, strictly and narrowly so called, they are unquestionably that consciousness of the *whence* and the *whither* that always accompanies its flows. If recently the brain-tract *a* was vividly excited, and then *b*, and now vividly *c*, the total present consciousness is not produced simply by *c*'s excitement, but also by the dying vibrations of *a* and *b* as well. If we want to represent the brain-process we must write it thus: *abc*—three different processes coexisting, and correlated with them a thought which is no one of the three thoughts which they would have produced had each of them occurred alone. But whatever this fourth thought may exactly be, it seems impossible that it should not be something *like* each of the three other thoughts whose tracts are concerned in its production, though in a fast-waning phase.

It all goes back to what we said in another connection only a few pages ago. As the total neurosis changes, so does the total psychosis change. But as the changes of neurosis are never absolutely discontinuous, so must the successive psychoses shade gradually

into each other, although their *rate* of change may be much faster at one moment than at the next.

This difference in the rate of change lies at the basis of a difference of subjective states of which we ought immediately to speak. When the rate is slow we are aware of the object of our thought in a comparatively restful and stable way. When rapid, we are aware of a passage, a relation, a transition *from* it, or *between* it and something else. As we take, in fact, a general view of the wonderful stream of our consciousness, what strikes us first is this different pace of its parts. Like a bird's life, it seems to be made of an alternation of flights and perchings. The rhythm of language expresses this, where every thought is expressed in a sentence, and every sentence closed by a period. The resting-places are usually occupied by sensorial imaginations of some sort, whose peculiarity is that they can be held before the mind for an indefinite time, and contemplated without changing; the places of flight are filled with thoughts of relations, static or dynamic, that for the most part obtain between the matters contemplated in the periods of comparative rest.

*Let us call the resting-places the “substantive parts,” and the places of flight the “transitive parts,” of the stream of thought.* It then appears that the main end of our thinking is at all times the attainment of some other substantive part than the one from which we

have just been dislodged. And we may say that the main use of the transitive parts is to lead us from one substantive conclusion to another.

Now it is very difficult, introspectively, to see the transitive parts for what they really are. If they are but flights to a conclusion, stopping them to look at them before the conclusion is reached is really annihilating them. Whilst if we wait till the conclusion *be* reached, it so exceeds them in vigor and stability that it quite eclipses and swallows them up in its glare. Let anyone try to cut a thought across in the middle and get a look at its section, and he will see how difficult the introspective observation of the transitive tracts is. The rush of the thought is so headlong that it almost always brings us up at the conclusion before we can arrest it. Or if our purpose is nimble enough and we do arrest it, it ceases forthwith to be itself. As a snow-flake crystal caught in the warm hand is no longer a crystal but a drop, so, instead of catching the feeling of relation moving to its term, we find we have caught some substantive thing, usually the last word we were pronouncing, statically taken, and with its function, tendency, and particular meaning in the sentence quite evaporated. The attempt at introspective analysis in these cases is in fact like seizing a spinning top to catch its motion, or trying to turn up the gas quickly enough to see how the darkness looks. And the chal-

lenge to *produce* these psychoses, which is sure to be thrown by doubting psychologists at anyone who contends for their existence, is as unfair as Zeno's treatment of the advocates of motion, when, asking them to point out in what place an arrow is when it moves, he argues the falsity of their thesis from their inability to make to so preposterous a question an immediate reply.

The results of this introspective difficulty are baleful. If to hold fast and observe the transitive parts of thought's stream be so hard, then the great blunder to which all schools are liable must be the failure to register them, and the undue emphasizing of the more substantive parts of the stream. Were we not ourselves a moment since in danger of ignoring any feeling transitive between the silence and the thunder, and of treating their boundary as a sort of break in the mind? Now such ignoring as this has historically worked in two ways. One set of thinkers have been led by it to *Sensationalism*. Unable to lay their hands on any coarse feelings corresponding to the innumerable relations and forms of connection between the facts of the world, finding no *named* subjective modifications mirroring such relations, they have for the most part denied that feelings of relation exist, and many of them, like Hume, have gone so far as to deny the reality of most relations *out* of the mind as well as in it.

Substantive psychoses, sensations and their copies and derivatives, juxtaposed like dominoes in a game, but really separate, everything else verbal illusion,—such is the upshot of this view. The *Intellectualists*, on the other hand, unable to give up the reality of relations *extra mentem*, but equally unable to point to any distinct substantive feelings in which they were known, have made the same admission that the feelings do not exist. But they have drawn an opposite conclusion. The relations must be known, they say, in something that is no feeling, no mental modification continuous and consubstantial with the subjective tissue out of which sensations and other substantive states are made. They are known, these relations, by something that lies on an entirely different plane, by an *actus purus* of Thought, Intellect, or Reason, all written with capitals and considered to mean something utterly superior to any fact of sensibility whatever.

But from our point of view both Intellectualists and Sensationalists are wrong. If there be such things as feelings at all, *then so surely as relations between objects exist in rerum naturâ, so surely, and more surely, do feelings exist to which these relations are known.* There is not a conjunction or a preposition, and hardly an adverbial phrase, syntactic form, or inflection of voice, in human speech, that does not express some shading or other of relation which we at some

moment actually feel to exist between the larger objects of our thought. If we speak objectively, it is the real relations that appear revealed; if we speak subjectively, it is the stream of consciousness that matches each of them by an inward coloring of its own. In either case the relations are numberless, and no existing language is capable of doing justice to all their shades.

We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of *cold*. Yet we do not: so inveterate has our habit become of recognizing the existence of the substantive parts alone, that language almost refuses to lend itself to any other use. The Empiricists have always dwelt on its influence in making us suppose that where we have a separate name, a separate thing must needs be there to correspond with it; and they have rightly denied the existence of the mob of abstract entities, principles, and forces, in whose favor no other evidence than this could be brought up. But they have said nothing of that obverse error, of supposing that where there is *no* name no entity can exist. All *dumb* or anonymous psychic states have, owing to this error, been coolly suppressed; or, if recognized at all, have been named after the substantive perception they led to, as thoughts “about” this object or “about” that, the stolid

word *about* engulfing all their delicate idiosyncrasies in its monotonous sound. Thus the greater and greater accentuation and isolation of the substantive parts have continually gone on. . . .

#### CHAPTER X: THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF SELF

Let us begin with the Self in its widest acceptation, and follow it up to its most delicate and subtle form, advancing from the study of the empirical, as the Germans call it, to that of the pure, Ego.

##### *The Empirical Self or Me*

The Empirical Self of each of us is all that he is tempted to call by the name of *me*. But it is clear that between what a man calls *me* and what he simply calls *mine* the line is difficult to draw. We feel and act about certain things that are ours very much as we feel and act about ourselves. Our fame, our children, the work of our hands, may be as dear to us as our bodies are, and arouse the same feelings and the same acts of reprisal if attacked. And our bodies themselves, are they simply ours, or are they *us*? Certainly men have been ready to disown their very bodies and to regard them as mere vestures, or even as prisons of clay from which they should some day be glad to escape.

We see then that we are dealing with a fluctuating material. The same object being sometimes treated as a part of me, at other times as simply mine, and then again as if I had nothing to do with it at all. *In its widest possible sense, however, a man's Self is the sum total of all that he CAN call his*, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account. All these things give him the same emotions. If they wax and prosper, he feels triumphant; if they dwindle and die away, he feels cast down....

The constituents of the Self may be divided into two classes, those which make up respectively—

- (a) The material Self;
- (b) The social Self;
- (c) The spiritual Self; and
- (d) The pure Ego.

(a) The body is the innermost part of *the material Self* in each of us; and certain parts of the body seem more intimately ours than the rest. The clothes come next. The old saying that the human person is composed of three parts—soul, body and clothes—is more than a joke. We so appropriate our clothes and identify ourselves with them that there are few of us who,

if asked to choose between having a beautiful body clad in raiment perpetually shabby and unclean, and having an ugly and blemished form always spotlessly attired, would not hesitate a moment before making a decisive reply. Next, our immediate family is a part of ourselves. Our father and mother, our wife and babes, are bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. When they die, a part of our very selves is gone. If they do anything wrong, it is our shame. If they are insulted, our anger flashes forth as readily as if we stood in their place. Our home comes next. Its scenes are part of our life; its aspects awaken the tenderest feelings of affection; and we do not easily forgive the stranger who, in visiting it, finds fault with its arrangements or treats it with contempt. All these different things are the objects of instinctive preferences coupled with the most important practical interests of life. We all have a blind impulse to watch over our body, to deck it with clothing of an ornamental sort, to cherish parents, wife and babes, and to find for ourselves a home of our own which we may live in and “improve.”

An equally instinctive impulse drives us to collect property; and the collections thus made become, with different degrees of intimacy, parts of our empirical selves. The parts of our wealth most intimately ours are those which are saturated with our labor. There

are few men who would not feel personally annihilated if a life-long construction of their hands or brains—say an entomological collection or an extensive work in manuscript—were suddenly swept away. The miser feels similarly towards his gold, and although it is true that a part of our depression at the loss of possessions is due to our feeling that we must now go without certain goods that we expected the possessions to bring in their train, yet in every case there remains, over and above this, a sense of the shrinkage of our personality, a partial conversion of ourselves to nothingness, which is a psychological phenomenon by itself. We are all at once assimilated to the tramps and poor devils whom we so despise, and at the same time removed farther than ever away from the happy sons of earth who lord it over land and sea and men in the full-blown lustihood that wealth and power can give, and before whom, stiffen ourselves as we will by appealing to anti-snobbish first principles, we cannot escape an emotion, open or sneaking, of respect and dread.

(b) *A man's Social Self* is the recognition which he gets from his mates. We are not only gregarious animals, liking to be in sight of our fellows, but we have an innate propensity to get ourselves noticed, and noticed favorably, by our kind. No more fiendish punishment could be devised, were such a thing physically

possible, than that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by all the members thereof. If no one turned round when we entered, answered when we spoke, or minded what we did, but if every person we met “cut us dead,” and acted as if we were non-existing things, a kind of rage and impotent despair would ere long well up in us, from which the cruellest bodily tortures would be a relief; for these would make us feel that, however bad might be our plight, we had not sunk to such a depth as to be unworthy of attention at all.

Properly speaking, *a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him* and carry an image of him in their mind. To wound any one of these his images is to wound him. But as the individuals who carry the images fall naturally into classes, we may practically say that he has as many different social selves as there are distinct *groups* of persons about whose opinion he cares. He generally shows a different side of himself to each of these different groups. Many a youth who is demure enough before his parents and teachers, swears and swaggers like a pirate among his “tough” young friends. We do not show ourselves to our children as to our club-companions, to our customers as to the laborers we employ, to our own masters and employers as to our intimate friends. From this there results what practi-

cally is a division of the man into several selves; and this may be a discordant splitting, as where one is afraid to let one set of his acquaintances know him as he is elsewhere; or it may be a perfectly harmonious division of labor, as where one tender to his children is stern to the soldiers or prisoners under his command.

The most peculiar social self which one is apt to have is in the mind of the person one is in love with. The good or bad fortunes of this self cause the most intense elation and dejection—unreasonable enough as measured by every other standard than that of the organic feeling of the individual. To his own consciousness he *is* not, so long as this particular social self fails to get recognition, and when it is recognized his contentment passes all bounds.

A man's *fame*, good or bad, and his *honor* or dis-honor, are names for one of his social selves. The particular social self of a man called his honor is usually the result of one of those splittings of which we have spoken. It is his image in the eyes of his own "set," which exalts or condemns him as he conforms or not to certain requirements that may not be made of one in another walk of life. Thus a layman may abandon a city infected with cholera; but a priest or a doctor would think such an act incompatible with his honor. A soldier's honor requires him to fight or to die under

circumstances where another man can apologize or run away with no stain upon his social self. A judge, a statesman, are in like manner debarred by the honor of their cloth from entering into pecuniary relations perfectly honorable to persons in private life. Nothing is commoner than to hear people discriminate between their different selves of this sort: "As a man I pity you, but as an official I must show you no mercy; as a politician I regard him as an ally, but as a moralist I loathe him"; etc., etc. What may be called "club-opinion" is one of the very strongest forces in life. The thief must not steal from other thieves; the gambler must pay his gambling-debts, though he pay no other debts in the world. The code of honor of fashionable society has throughout history been full of permissions as well as of vetoes, the only reason for following either of which is that so we best serve one of our social selves. You must not lie in general, but you may lie as much as you please if asked about your relations with a lady; you must accept a challenge from an equal, but if challenged by an inferior you may laugh him to scorn: these are examples of what is meant.

(c) By the Spiritual Self, so far as it belongs to the Empirical Me, I mean a man's inner or subjective being, his psychic faculties or dispositions, taken con-

cretely; not the bare principle of personal Unity, or “pure” Ego, which remains still to be discussed. These psychic dispositions are the most enduring and intimate part of the self, that which we most verily seem to be. We take a purer self-satisfaction when we think of our ability to argue and discriminate, of our moral sensibility and conscience, of our indomitable will, than when we survey any of our other possessions. Only when these are altered is a man said to be *alienatus a se*.

Now this spiritual self may be considered in various ways. We may divide it into faculties, as just instanced, isolating them one from another, and identifying ourselves with either in turn. This is an *abstract* way of dealing with consciousness, in which, as it actually presents itself, a plurality of such faculties are always to be simultaneously found; or we may insist on a concrete view, and then the spiritual self in us will be either the entire stream of our personal consciousness, or the present “segment” or “section” of that stream, according as we take a broader or a narrower view—both the stream and the section being concrete existences in time, and each being a unity after its own peculiar kind. But whether we take it abstractly or concretely, our considering the spiritual self at all is a reflective process, is the result of our

abandoning the outward-looking point of view, and of our having become able to think of subjectivity as such, *to think ourselves as thinkers*.

This attention to thought as such, and the identification of ourselves with it rather than with any of the objects which it reveals, is a momentous and in some respects a rather mysterious operation, of which we need here only say that as a matter of fact it exists; and that in everyone, at an early age, the distinction between thought as such, and what it is “of” or “about,” has become familiar to the mind. The deeper grounds for this discrimination may possibly be hard to find; but superficial grounds are plenty and near at hand. Almost anyone will tell us that thought is a different sort of existence from things, because many sorts of thought are of no things—e.g., pleasures, pains, and emotions; others are of non-existent things—errors and fictions; others again of existent things, but in a form that is symbolic and does not resemble them—abstract ideas and concepts; whilst in the thoughts that do resemble the things they are “of” (percepts, sensations), we can feel, alongside of the thing known, the thought of it going on as an altogether separate act and operation in the mind.

Now this subjective life of ours, distinguished as such so clearly from the objects known by its means, may, as aforesaid, be taken by us in a concrete or in

an abstract way. Of the concrete way I will say nothing just now, except that the actual “section” of the stream will ere long, in our discussion of the nature of the principle of *unity* in consciousness, play a very important part. The abstract way claims our attention first. If the stream as a whole is identified with the Self far more than any outward thing, *a certain portion of the stream abstracted from the rest* is so identified in an altogether peculiar degree, and is felt by all men as a sort of innermost centre within the circle, of sanctuary within the citadel, constituted by the subjective life as a whole. Compared with this element of the stream, the other parts, even of the subjective life, seem transient external possessions, of which each in turn can be disowned, whilst that which disowns them remains. Now, *what is this self of all the other selves?*

Probably all men would describe it in much the same way up to a certain point. They would call it the *active* element in all consciousness; saying that whatever qualities a man’s feelings may possess, or whatever content his thought may include, there is a spiritual something in him which seems to go *out* to meet these qualities and contents, whilst they seem to *come in* to be received by it. It is what welcomes or rejects. It presides over the perception of sensations, and by giving or withholding its assent it influences

the movements they tend to arouse. It is the home of interest,—not the pleasant or the painful, not even pleasure or pain, as such, but that within us to which pleasure and pain, the pleasant and the painful, speak. It is the source of effort and attention, and the place from which appear to emanate the fiats of the will. A physiologist who should reflect upon it in his own person could hardly help, I should think, connecting it more or less vaguely with the process by which ideas or incoming sensations are “reflected” or pass over into outward acts. Not necessarily that it should *be* this process or the mere feeling of this process, but that it should be in some close way *related* to this process; for it plays a part analogous to it in the psychic life, being a sort of junction at which sensory ideas terminate and from which motor ideas proceed, and forming a kind of link between the two. Being more incessantly there than any other single element of the mental life, the other elements end by seeming to accrete round it and to belong to it. It becomes opposed to them as the permanent is opposed to the changing and inconstant.

One may, I think, without fear of being upset by any future Galtonian circulars, believe that all men must single out from the rest of what they call themselves some central principle of which each would recognize the foregoing to be a fair general description,—

accurate enough, at any rate, to denote what is meant, and keep it unconfused with other things. The moment, however, they came to closer quarters with it, trying to define more accurately its precise nature, we should find opinions beginning to diverge. Some would say that it is a simple active substance, the soul, of which they are thus conscious; others, that it is nothing but a fiction, the imaginary being denoted by the pronoun I; and between these extremes of opinion all sorts of intermediaries would be found.

Later we must ourselves discuss them all, and sufficient to that day will be the evil thereof. Now, let us try to settle for ourselves as definitely as we can, just how this central nucleus of the Self may *feel*, no matter whether it be a spiritual substance or only a delusive word.

For this central part of the Self is *felt*. It may be all that Transcendentalists say it is, and all that Empiricists say it is into the bargain, but it is at any rate no *mere ens rationis*, cognized only in an intellectual way, and no *mere* summation of memories or *mere* sound of a word in our ears. It is something with which we also have direct sensible acquaintance, and which is as fully present at any moment of consciousness in which it *is* present, as in a whole lifetime of such moments. When, just now, it was called an abstraction, that did not mean that, like some general

notion, it could not be presented in a particular experience. It only meant that in the stream of consciousness it never was found all alone. But when it is found, it is *felt*; just as the body is felt, the feeling of which is also an abstraction, because never is the body felt all alone, but always together with other things. *Now can we tell more precisely in what the feeling of this central active self consists,—not necessarily as yet what the active self is, as a being or principle, but what we feel when we become aware of its existence?*

I think I can in my own case; and as what I say will be likely to meet with opposition if generalized (as indeed it may be in part inapplicable to other individuals), I had better continue in the first person, leaving my description, to be accepted by those to whose introspection it may commend itself as true, and confessing my inability to meet the demands of others, if others there be.

First of all, I am aware of a constant play of furtherances and hindrances in my thinking, of checks and releases, tendencies which run with desire, and tendencies which run the other way. Among the matters I think of, some range themselves on the side of the thought's interests, whilst others play an unfriendly part thereto. The mutual inconsistencies and agreements, reinforcements and obstructions, which obtain

amongst these objective matters reverberate backwards and produce what seem to be incessant reactions of my spontaneity upon them, welcoming or opposing, appropriating or disowning, striving with or against, saying yes or no. This palpitating inward life is, in me, that central nucleus which I just tried to describe in terms that all men might use.

But when I forsake such general descriptions and grapple with particulars, coming to the closest possible quarters with the facts, *it is difficult for me to detect in the activity any purely spiritual element at all. Whenever my introspective glance succeeds in turning round quickly enough to catch one of these manifestations of spontaneity in the act, all it can ever feel distinctly is some bodily process, for the most part taking place within the head.* Omitting for a moment what is obscure in these introspective results, let me try to state those particulars which to my own consciousness seem indubitable and distinct.

In the first place, the acts of attending, assenting, negating, making an effort, are felt as movements of something in the head. In many cases it is possible to describe these movements quite exactly. In attending to either an idea or a sensation belonging to a particular sense-sphere, the movement is the adjustment of the sense-organ, felt as it occurs. I cannot think in visual terms, for example, without feeling a fluctuating

play of pressures, convergences, divergences, and accommodations in my eyeballs. The direction in which the object is conceived to lie determines the character of these movements, the feeling of which becomes, for my consciousness, identified with the manner in which I make myself ready to receive the visible thing. My brain appears to me as if all shot across with lines of direction, of which I have become conscious as my attention has shifted from one sense-organ to another, in passing to successive outer things, or in following trains of varying sense-ideas.

When I try to remember or reflect, the movements in question, instead of being directed towards the periphery, seem to come from the periphery inwards and feel like a sort of *withdrawal* from the outer world. As far as I can detect, these feelings are due to an actual rolling outwards and upwards of the eyeballs, such as I believe occurs in me in sleep, and is the exact opposite of their action in fixating a physical thing. In reasoning, I find that I am apt to have a kind of vaguely localized diagram in my mind, with the various fractional objects of the thought disposed at particular points thereof; and the oscillations of my attention from one of them to another are most distinctly felt as alternations of direction in movements occurring inside the head.

In consenting and negating, and in making a mental effort, the movements seem more complex, and I find them harder to describe. The opening and closing of the glottis play a great part in these operations, and, less distinctly, the movements of the soft palate, etc., shutting off the posterior nares from the mouth. My glottis is like a sensitive valve, intercepting my breath instantaneously at every mental hesitation or felt aversion to the objects of my thought, and as quickly opening, to let the air pass through my throat and nose, the moment the repugnance is overcome. The feeling of the movement of this air is, in me, one strong ingredient of the feeling of assent. The movements of the muscles of the brow and eyelids also respond very sensitively to every fluctuation in the agreeableness or disagreeableness of what comes before my mind.

In *effort* of any sort, contractions of the jaw-muscles and of those of respiration are added to those of the brow and glottis, and thus the feeling passes out of the head properly so called. It passes out of the head whenever the welcoming or rejecting of the object is *strongly* felt. Then a set of feelings pour in from many bodily parts, all “expressive” of my emotion, and the head-feelings proper are swallowed up in this larger mass.

In a sense, then, it may be truly said that, in one person at least, *the "Self of selves," when carefully examined, is found to consist mainly of the collection of these peculiar motions in the head or between the head and throat.* I do not for a moment say that this is *all* it consists of, for I fully realize how desperately hard is introspection in this field. But I feel quite sure that these cephalic motions are the portions of my innermost activity of which I am *most distinctly aware*. If the dim portions which I cannot yet define should prove to be like unto these distinct portions in me, and I like other men, *it would follow that our entire feeling of spiritual activity, or what commonly passes by that name, is really a feeling of bodily activities whose exact nature is by most men overlooked.*

Now, without pledging ourselves in any way to adopt this hypothesis, let us dally with it for a while to see to what consequences it might lead if it were true.

In the first place, the nuclear part of the Self, intermediary between ideas and overt acts, would be a collection of activities physiologically in no essential way different from the overt acts themselves. If we divide all possible physiological acts into *adjustments* and *executions*, the nuclear self would be the adjustments collectively considered; and the less intimate, more shifting self, so far as it was active, would be

the executions. But both adjustments and executions would obey the reflex type. Both would be the result of sensorial and ideational processes discharging either into each other within the brain, or into muscles and other parts outside. The peculiarity of the adjustments would be that they are minimal reflexes, few in number, incessantly repeated, constant amid great fluctuations in the rest of the mind's content, and entirely unimportant and uninteresting except through their uses in furthering or inhibiting the presence of various things, and actions before consciousness. These characters would naturally keep us from introspectively paying much attention to them in detail, whilst they would at the same time make us aware of them as a coherent group of processes, strongly contrasted with all the other things consciousness contained,—even with the other constituents of the "Self," material, social, or spiritual, as the case might be. They are reactions, and they are *primary* reactions. Everything arouses them; for objects which have no other effects will for a moment contract the brow and make the glottis close. It is as if all that visited the mind had to stand an entrance-examination, and just show its face so as to be either approved or sent back. These primary reactions are like the opening or the closing of the door. In the midst of psychic change they are the permanent core of turnings-towards and

turnings-from, of yieldings and arrests, which naturally seem central and interior in comparison with the foreign matters, *a propos* to which they occur, and hold a sort of arbitrating, decisive position, quite unlike that held by any of the other constituents of the Me. It would not be surprising, then, if we were to feel them as the birthplace of conclusions and the starting point of acts, or if they came to appear as what we called a while back the “sanctuary within the citadel” of our personal life.

If they really were the innermost sanctuary, the *ultimate* one of all the selves whose being we can ever directly experience, it would follow that *all* that is experienced is, strictly considered, *objective*; that this Objective falls asunder into two contrasted parts, one realized as “Self,” the other as “not-Self”; and that over and above these parts there is nothing save the fact that they are known, the fact of the stream of thought being there as the indispensable subjective condition of their being experienced at all. But this *condition* of the experience is not one of the *things experienced* at the moment; this knowing is not immediately *known*. It is only known in subsequent reflection. Instead, then, of the stream of thought being one of *consciousness*, “thinking its own existence along with whatever else it thinks,” (as Ferrier says) it might be better called a stream of *Sciousness* pure

and simple, thinking objects of some of which it makes what it calls a "Me," and only aware of its "pure" Self in an abstract, hypothetic or conceptual way. Each "section" of the stream would then be a bit of sciousness or knowledge of this sort, including and contemplating its "me" and its "not-me" as objects which work out their drama together, but not yet including or contemplating its own subjective being. The sciousness in question would be the *Thinker*, and the existence of this thinker would be given to us rather as a logical postulate than as that direct inner perception of spiritual activity which we naturally believe ourselves to have. "Matter," as something behind physical phenomena, is a postulate of this sort. Between the postulated Matter and the postulated Thinker, the sheet of phenomena would then swing, some of them (the "realities") pertaining more to the matter, others (the fictions, opinions, and errors) pertaining more to the Thinker. But *who* the Thinker would be, or how many distinct Thinkers we ought to suppose in the universe, would all be subjects for an ulterior metaphysical inquiry.

Speculations like this traverse common-sense; and not only do they traverse common sense (which in philosophy is no insuperable objection) but they contradict the fundamental assumption of *every* philosophic school. Spiritualists, transcendentalists, and

empiricists alike admit in us a continual direct perception of the thinking activity in the concrete. However they may otherwise disagree, they vie with each other in the cordiality of their recognition of our *thoughts* as the one sort of existent which skepticism cannot touch. I will therefore treat the last few pages as a parenthetical digression, and from now to the end of the volume revert to the path of common-sense again. I mean by this that I will continue to assume (as I have assumed all along, especially in the last chapter) a direct awareness of the process of our thinking as such, simply insisting on the fact that it is an even more inward and subtle phenomenon than most of us suppose. At the conclusion of the volume, however, I may permit myself to revert again to the doubts here provisionally mooted, and will indulge in some metaphysical reflections suggested by them.

At present, then, the only conclusion I come to is the following: That (in some persons at least) the part of the innermost Self which is most vividly felt turns out to consist for the most part of a collection of cephalic movements of “adjustments” which, for want of attention and reflection, usually fail to be perceived and classed as what they are; that over and above these there is an obscurer feeling of something more; but whether it be of fainter physiological processes, or of nothing objective at all, but rather of subjectiv-

ity as such, of thought become “its own object,” must at present remain an open question,—like the question whether it be an indivisible active soul-substance, or the question whether it be a personification of the pronoun I, or any other of the guesses as to what its nature may be.

# 8

## “The Energies of Men” (1907)

### INTRODUCTION

*In his Varieties of Religious Experience, James suggested that the “sick-souled” individual (who experiences the world as deadening or radically alien) can occasionally be “twice-born,” and reclaim something of the vitality of the healthy-minded. This is often described as a spiritual conversion, and in some cases it undoubtedly is, but James in his later life was interested in all forms of conversion, not only the religious sort. This interest is at the heart of “The Energies of Men,” which James first published in 1907.*

*At its most elementary, a conversion is the process or act of changing from one state to another. It sounds simple, but anyone who has undergone a conversion knows that this moment of transformation is among the most difficult and puzzling of life. In “The Energies of Men,” James is especially interested in cases when energies are completely spent, when we are laid low, and then, miraculously, a “second wind” carries us beyond our (often self-imposed) boundaries.*

*On usual occasions, we make a practice of stopping an occupation as soon as we meet the first effective layer (so to call it) of fatigue. We have then walked, played, or worked “enough,” so we desist. That amount of fatigue is an efficacious obstruction on this side of which our usual life is cast. But if an unusual necessity forces us to press onward a surprising thing occurs.*

*We are able to open these hidden “reservoirs of individual power” that are so rarely plumbed we scarcely trust their existence. Yet there they are—right below the surface, below the habits of our easy, everyday life—ready to support us all of a sudden, when we need them most. James speaks of these as “dynamo-genic,” or power-producing, agents that can limber us up again for action. We need, he says, a sort of field-guide or “topography” of the whole re-generating and re-energizing reservoir system.*

*This field-guide should include yoga, according to James (in one of the earliest academic discussions, in the West, of yoga practices): yoga is “the most venerable ascetic system, and the one whose results have the most voluminous experimental corroboration.” Every species of yoga should be cataloged: “Hatha Yoga, Raja Yoga, Karma Yoga,” and so on.*

*Even despair belongs in our field-guide: “Despair lames most people, but it wakes others fully up. Every*

*siege or shipwreck or polar expedition brings out some hero who keeps the whole company in heart.” One might add to this list of hardships an expedition to the Amazon Basin, like the one James, wrestling with his own despair, did in his twenties alongside famed biologist and geologist Louis Agassiz.*

To be clear, energy is not simply defined by muscular exertion, but the “sum-total of activities,” as James describes them, “some outer and some inner, some muscular, some emotional, some moral, some spiritual, of whose waxing and waning . . . [one] is at all times so well aware.” The task of life is to keep these energies at a maximum, to never let them fully wane, but just as importantly, to realize that we are always stronger and more resourceful than we typically imagine.



Everyone knows what it is to start a piece of work, either intellectual or muscular, feeling stale—or *oold*, as an Adirondack guide once put it to me. And everybody knows what it is to “warm up” to his job. The process of warming up gets particularly striking in the phenomenon known as “second wind.” On usual occasions we make a practice of stopping an occupation as soon as we meet the first effective layer (so to

call it) of fatigue. We have then walked, played, or worked "enough," so we desist. That amount of fatigue is an efficacious obstruction on this side of which our usual life is cast. But if an unusual necessity forces us to press onward a surprising thing occurs. The fatigue gets worse up to a certain critical point, when gradually or suddenly it passes away, and we are fresher than before. We have evidently tapped a level of new energy, masked until then by the fatigue-obstacle usually obeyed. There may be layer after layer of this experience. A third and a fourth "wind" may supervene. Mental activity shows the phenomenon as well as physical, and in exceptional cases we may find, beyond the very extremity of fatigue-distress, amounts of ease and power that we never dreamed ourselves to own,—sources of strength habitually not taxed at all, because habitually we never push through the obstruction, never pass those early critical points. . . .

For many years I have mused on the phenomenon of second wind, trying to find a physiological theory. It is evident that our organism has stored-up reserves of energy that are ordinarily not called upon, but that may be called upon: deeper and deeper strata of combustible or explosive material, discontinuously arranged, but ready for use by anyone who probes so deep, and repairing themselves by rest as well as do

the superficial strata. Most of us continue living unnecessarily near our surface. Our energy-budget is like our nutritive budget. Physiologists say that a man is in “nutritive equilibrium” when day after day he neither gains nor loses weight. But the odd thing is that this condition may obtain on astonishingly different amounts of food. Take a man in nutritive equilibrium, and systematically increase or lessen his rations. In the first case he will begin to gain weight, in the second case to lose it. The change will be greatest on the first day, less on the second, less still on the third; and so on, till he has gained all that he will gain, or lost all that he will lose, on that altered diet. He is now in nutritive equilibrium again, but with a new weight; and this neither lessens nor increases because his various combustion-processes have adjusted themselves to the changed dietary. . . .

Just so one can be in what I might call “efficiency-equilibrium” (neither gaining nor losing power when once the equilibrium is reached) on astonishingly different quantities of work, no matter in what direction the work may be measured. It may be physical work, intellectual work, moral work, or spiritual work.

Of course there are limits: the trees don’t grow into the sky. But the plain fact remains that men the world over possess amounts of resource which only very exceptional individuals push to their extremes of use. But the very same individual, pushing his energies to

their extreme, may in a vast number of cases keep the pace up day after day, and find no “reaction” of a bad sort, so long as decent hygienic conditions are preserved. His more active rate of energizing does not wreck him; for the organism adapts itself, and as the rate of waste augments, augments correspondingly the rate of repair. . . .

If my reader will put together these two conceptions, first, that few men live at their maximum of energy, and second, that anyone may be in vital equilibrium at very different rates of energizing, he will find, I think, that a very pretty practical problem of national economy, as well as of individual ethics, opens upon his view. In rough terms, we may say that a man who energizes below his normal maximum fails by just so much to profit by his chance at life; and that a nation filled with such men is inferior to a nation run at higher pressure. The problem is, then, how can men be trained up to their most useful pitch of energy? And how can nations make such training most accessible to all their sons and daughters. This, after all, is only the general problem of education, formulated in slightly different terms.

“Rough” terms, I said just now, because the words “energy” and “maximum” may easily suggest only *quantity* to the reader’s mind, whereas in measuring the human energies of which I speak, qualities as well as quantities have to be taken into account. Everyone

feels that his total *power* rises when he passes to a higher *qualitative* level of life.

Writing is higher than walking, thinking is higher than writing, deciding higher than thinking, deciding “no” higher than deciding “yes”—at least the man who passes from one of these activities to another will usually say that each later one involves a greater element of *inner work* than the earlier ones, even though the total heat given out or the foot-pounds expended by the organism, may be less. Just how to conceive this inner work physiologically is as yet impossible, but psychologically we all know what the word means. We need a particular spur or effort to start us upon inner work; it tires us to sustain it; and when long sustained, we know how easily we lapse. When I speak of “energizing,” and its rates and levels and sources, I mean therefore our inner as well as our outer work.

Let no one think, then, that our problem of individual and national economy is solely that of the maximum of pounds raisable against gravity, the maximum of locomotion, or of agitation of any sort, that human beings can accomplish. That might signify little more than hurrying and jumping about in incoordinated ways; whereas inner work, though it so often reinforces outer work, quite as often means its arrest. To relax, to say to ourselves . . . “Peace! be still!”

is sometimes a great achievement of inner work. When I speak of human energizing in general, the reader must therefore understand that sum-total of activities, some outer and some inner, some muscular, some emotional, some moral, some spiritual, of whose waxing and waning in himself he is at all times so well aware. How to keep it at an appreciable maximum? How not to let the level lapse? That is the great problem. But the work of men and women is of innumerable kinds, each kind being, as we say, carried on by a particular faculty; so the great problem splits into two sub-problems, thus:

- (1). What are the limits of human faculty in various directions?
- (2). By what diversity of means, in the differing types of human beings, may the faculties be stimulated to their best results?

Read in one way, these two questions sound both trivial and familiar: there is a sense in which we have all asked them ever since we were born. Yet *as a methodical programme of scientific inquiry*, I doubt whether they have ever been seriously taken up. If answered fully; almost the whole of mental science and of the science of conduct would find a place under them. I propose, in what follows, to press them on the reader's attention in an informal way.

The first point to agree upon in this enterprise is that *as a rule men habitually use only a small part of the powers which they actually possess and which they might use under appropriate conditions.*

Every one is familiar with the phenomenon of feeling more or less alive on different days. Every one knows on any given day that there are energies slumbering in him which the incitements of that day do not call forth, but which he might display if these were greater. Most of us feel as if a sort of cloud weighed upon us, keeping us below our highest notch of clearness in discernment, sureness in reasoning, or firmness in deciding. Compared with what we ought to be, we are only half awake. Our fires are damped, our drafts are checked. We are making use of only a small part of our possible mental and physical resources. In some persons this sense of being cut off from their rightful resources is extreme, and we then get the formidable neurasthenic and psychasthenic conditions with life grown into one tissue of impossibilities, that so many medical books describe.

Stating the thing broadly, the human individual thus lives usually far within his limits; he possesses powers of various sorts which he habitually fails to use. He energizes below his *maximum*, and he behaves below his *optimum*. In elementary faculty, in co-ordination, in power of *inhibition* and control,

in every conceivable way, his life is contracted like the field of vision of an hysterical subject—but with less excuse, for the poor hysterical is diseased, while in the rest of us it is only an inveterate *habit*—the habit of inferiority to our full self—that is bad.

Admit so much, then, and admit also that the charge of being inferior to their full self is far truer of some men than of others; then the practical question ensues: *to what do the better men owe their escape? and, in the fluctuations which all men feel in their own degree of energizing, to what are the improvements due, when they occur?*

In general terms the answer is plain:

Either some unusual stimulus fills them with emotional excitement, or some unusual idea of necessity induces them to make an extra effort of will. *Excitements, ideas, and efforts*, in a word, are what carry us over the dam.

In those “hyperesthetic” conditions which chronic invalidism so often brings in its train, the dam has changed its normal place. The slightest functional exercise gives a distress which the patient yields to and stops. In such cases of “habit-neurosis” a new range of power often comes in consequence of the “bullying-treatment,” of efforts which the doctor obliges the patient, much against his will, to make. First comes the very extremity of distress, then follows unexpected

relief. There seems no doubt that *we are each and all of us to some extent victims of habit-neurosis*. We have to admit the wider potential range and the habitually narrow actual use. We live subject to arrest by degrees of fatigue which we have come only from habit to obey. Most of us may learn to push the barrier farther off, and to live in perfect comfort on much higher levels of power.

Country people and city people, as a class, illustrate this difference. The rapid rate of life, the number of decisions in an hour, the many things to keep account of, in a busy city man's or woman's life, seem monstrous to a country brother. He doesn't see how we live at all. A day in New York or Chicago fills him with terror. The danger and noise make it appear like a permanent earthquake. But *settle* him there, and in a year or two he will have caught the pulse-beat. He will vibrate to the city's rhythms; and if he only succeeds in his avocation, whatever that may be, he will find a joy in all the hurry and the tension, he will keep the pace as well as any of us, and get as much out of himself in any week as he ever did in ten weeks in the country.

The stimuli of those who successfully spend and undergo the transformation here, are duty, the example of others, and crowd-pressure and contagion. The transformation, moreover, is a chronic one: the new level of energy becomes permanent. The duties

of new offices of trust are constantly producing this effect on the human beings appointed to them. The physiologists call a stimulus "dynamogenic" when it increases the muscular contractions of men to whom it is applied; but appeals can be dynamogenic morally as well as muscularly. We are witnessing here in America to-day the dynamogenic effect of a very exalted political office upon the energies of an individual who had already manifested a healthy amount of energy before the office came.

Humbler examples show perhaps still better what chronic effects duty's appeal may produce in chosen individuals. John Stuart Mill somewhere says that women excel men in the power of keeping up sustained moral excitement. Every case of illness nursed by wife or mother is a proof of this; and where can one find greater examples of sustained endurance than in those thousands of poor homes, where the woman successfully holds the family together and keeps it going by taking all the thought and doing all the work—nursing, teaching, cooking, washing, sewing, scrubbing, saving, helping neighbors, "choring" outside—where does the catalogue end? If she does a bit of scolding now and then who can blame her? But often she does just the reverse; keeping the children clean and the man good tempered, and soothing and smoothing the whole neighborhood into finer shape.

Eighty years ago a certain Montyon left to the Académie Française a sum of money to be given in small prizes, to the best examples of “virtue” of the year. The academy’s committees, with great good sense, have shown a partiality to virtues simple and chronic, rather than to her spasmodic and dramatic flights; and the exemplary housewives reported on have been wonderful and admirable enough. In Paul Bourget’s report for this year we find numerous cases, of which this is a type; Jeanne Chaix, eldest of six children; mother insane, father chronically ill. Jeanne, with no money but her wages at a pasteboard-box factory, directs the household, brings up the children, and successfully maintains the family of eight, which thus subsists, morally as well as materially, by the sole force of her valiant will. In some of these French cases charity to outsiders is added to the inner family burden; or helpless relatives, young or old, are adopted, as if the strength were inexhaustible and ample for every appeal. Details are too long to quote here; but human nature, responding to the call of duty, appears nowhere sublimer than in the person of these humble heroines of family life.

Turning from more chronic to acuter proofs of human nature’s reserves of power, we find that the stimuli that carry us over the usually effective dam are most often the classic emotional ones, love, anger, crowd-contagion or despair. Despair lames most people,

but it wakes others fully up. Every siege or shipwreck or polar expedition brings out some hero who keeps the whole company in heart. Last year there was a terrible colliery explosion at Courrieres in France. Two hundred corpses, if I remember rightly, were exhumed. After twenty days of excavation, the rescuers heard a voice. "*Me voici*," said the first man unearthed. He proved to be a collier named Nemy, who had taken command of thirteen others in the darkness, disciplined them and cheered them, and brought them out alive. Hardly any of them could see or speak or walk when brought into the day. Five days later, a different type of vital endurance was unexpectedly unburied in the person of one Berton who, isolated from any but dead companions, had been able to sleep away most of his time. . . .

Such experiences show how profound is the alteration in the manner in which, under excitement, our organism will sometimes perform its physiological work. The processes of repair become different when the reserves have to be used, and for weeks and months the deeper use may go on.

Morbid cases, here as elsewhere, lay the normal machinery bare. In the first number of Dr. Morton Prince's *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, Dr. Janet has discussed five cases of morbid impulse, with an explanation that is precious for my present point of view. One is a girl who eats, eats, eats, all day. Another

walks, walks, walks, and gets her food from an automobile that escorts her. Another is a dipsomaniac. A fourth pulls out her hair. A fifth wounds her flesh and burns her skin. Hitherto such freaks of impulse have received Greek names (as bulimia, dromomania, etc.) and been scientifically disposed of as “episodic syndromata of hereditary degeneration.” But it turns out that Janet’s cases are all what he calls psychasthenics, or victims of a chronic sense of weakness, torpor, lethargy, fatigue, insufficiency, impossibility, unreality and powerlessness of will; and that in each and all of them the particular activity pursued, deleterious though it be, has the temporary result of raising the sense of vitality and making the patient feel alive again. These things reanimate: they would reanimate us, but it happens that in each patient the particular freak-activity chosen is the only thing that does reanimate; and therein lies the morbid state. The way to treat such persons is to discover to them more usual and useful ways of throwing their stores of vital energy into gear.

Colonel Baird-Smith, needing to draw on altogether extraordinary stores of energy, found that brandy and opium were ways of throwing them into gear.

Such cases are humanly typical. We are all to some degree oppressed, unfree. We don’t come to our own. It is there, but we don’t get at it. The threshold must be made to shift. Then many of us find that an eccen-

tric activity—a “spree,” say—relieves. There is no doubt that to some men sprees and excesses of almost any kind are medicinal, temporarily at any rate, in spite of what the moralists and doctors say.

But when the normal tasks and stimulations of life don’t put a man’s deeper levels of energy on tap, and he requires distinctly deleterious excitements, his constitution verges on the abnormal. The normal opener of deeper and deeper levels of energy is the will. The difficulty is to use it, to make the effort which the word volition implies. But if we do make it (or if a god, though he were only the god Chance, makes it through us), it will act dynamogenically on us for a month. It is notorious that a single successful effort of moral volition, such as saying “no” to some habitual temptation, or performing some courageous act, will launch a man on a higher level of energy for days and weeks, will give him a new range of power. “In the act of uncorking the whiskey bottle which I had brought home to get drunk upon,” said a man to me, “I suddenly found myself running out into the garden, where I smashed it on the ground. I felt so happy and uplifted after this act, that for two months I wasn’t tempted to touch a drop.”

The emotions and excitements due to usual situations are the usual inciters of the will. But these act discontinuously; and in the intervals the shallower

levels of life tend to close in and shut us off. Accordingly the best practical knowers of the human soul have invented the thing known as methodical ascetic discipline to keep the deeper levels constantly in reach. Beginning with easy tasks, passing to harder ones, and exercising day by day, it is, I believe, admitted that disciples of asceticism can reach very high levels of freedom and power of will.

Ignatius Loyola's spiritual exercises must have produced this result in innumerable devotees. But the most venerable ascetic system, and the one whose results have the most voluminous experimental corroboration, is undoubtedly the Yoga system in Hindustan.

From time immemorial, by Hatha Yoga, Raja Yoga, Karma Yoga, or whatever code of practice it might be, Hindu aspirants to perfection have trained themselves, month in and out, for years. The result claimed, and certainly in many cases accorded by impartial judges, is strength of character, personal power, unshakability of soul. In an article in the *Philosophical Review*, from which I am largely copying here, I have quoted at great length the experience with "Hatha Yoga" of a very gifted European friend of mine who, by persistently carrying out for several months its methods of fasting from food and sleep, its exercises in breathing and thought-concentration,

and its fantastic posture-gymnastics, seems to have succeeded in waking up deeper and deeper levels of will and moral and intellectual power in himself, and to have escaped from a decidedly menacing brain-condition of the "circular" type, from which he had suffered for years.

Judging by my friend's letters, of which the last I have is written fourteen months after the Yoga training began, there can be no doubt of his relative regeneration. He has undergone material trials with indifference, travelled third-class on Mediterranean steamers, and fourth-class on African trains, living with the poorest Arabs and sharing their unaccustomed food, all with equanimity. His devotion to certain interests has been put to heavy strain, and nothing is more remarkable to me than the changed moral tone with which he reports the situation. A profound modification has unquestionably occurred in the running of his mental machinery. The gearing has changed, and his will is available otherwise than it was.

My friend is a man of very peculiar temperament. Few of us would have had the will to start upon the Yoga training, which, once started, seemed to conjure the further willpower needed out of itself. And not all of those who could launch themselves would have reached the same results. The Hindus themselves

admit that in some men the results may come without call or bell. My friend writes to me: "You are quite right in thinking that religious crises, love-crises, indignation-crises may awaken in a very short time powers similar to those reached by years of patient Yoga-practice."

Probably most medical men would treat this individual's case as one of what it is fashionable now to call by the name of "self-suggestion," or "expectant attention"—as if those phrases were explanatory, or meant more than the fact that certain men can be influenced, while others cannot be influenced, by certain sorts of *ideas*. This leads me to say a word about ideas considered as dynamogenic agents, or stimuli for unlocking what would otherwise be unused reservoirs of individual power.

One thing that ideas do is to contradict other ideas and keep us from believing them. An idea that thus negates a first idea may itself in turn be negated by a third idea, and the first idea may thus regain its natural influence over our belief and determine our behavior. Our philosophic and religious development proceeds thus by credulities, negations, and the negating of negations.

But whether for arousing or for stopping belief, ideas may fail to be efficacious, just as a wire, at one time alive with electricity, may at another time be dead.

Here our insight into causes fails us, and we can only note results in general terms. In general, whether a given idea shall be a live idea depends more on the person into whose mind it is injected than on the idea itself. Which is the suggestive idea for this person, and which for that one? . . .

But apart from such individually varying susceptibilities, there are common lines along which men simply as men tend to be inflammable by ideas. As certain objects naturally awaken love, anger, or cupidity, so certain ideas naturally awaken the energies of loyalty, courage, endurance, or devotion. When these ideas are effective in an individual's life, their effect is often very great indeed. They may transfigure it, unlocking innumerable powers which, but for the idea, would never have come into play. "Fatherland," "the Flag," "the Union," "Holy Church," "the Monroe Doctrine," "Truth," "Science," "Liberty," Garibaldi's phrase, "Rome or Death," etc., are so many examples of energy-releasing ideas. The social nature of such phrases is an essential factor of their dynamic power. They are forces of detent in situations in which no other force produces equivalent effects, and each is a force of detent only in a specific group of men.

The memory that an oath or vow has been made will nerve one to abstinences and efforts otherwise impossible; witness the "pledge" in the history of the

temperance movement. A mere promise to his sweet-heart will clean up a youth's life all over—at any rate for time. For such effects an educated susceptibility is required. The idea of one's "honor," for example, unlocks energy only in those of us who have had the education of a "gentleman," so called. . . .

Conversions, whether they be political, scientific, philosophic, or religious, form another way in which bound energies are let loose. They unify us, and put a stop to ancient mental interferences. The result is freedom, and often a great enlargement of power. A belief that thus settles upon an individual always acts as a challenge to his will. But, for the particular challenge to operate, he must be the right challengee. In religious conversions we have so fine an adjustment that the idea may be in the mind of the challengee for years before it exerts effects; and why it should do so then is often so far from obvious that the event is taken for a miracle of grace, and not a natural occurrence. Whatever it is, it may be a highwater mark of energy, in which "noes," once impossible, are easy, and in which a new range of "yeses" gains the right of way.

We are just now witnessing a very copious unlocking of energies by ideas in the persons of those converts to "New Thought," "Christian Science," "Metaphysical Healing," or other forms of spiri-

tual philosophy, who are so numerous among us to-day. The ideas here are healthy-minded and optimistic. . . . The common feature of these optimistic faiths is that they all tend to the suppression of what Mr. Horace Fletcher calls "fearthought." Fearthought he defines as the "self-suggestion of inferiority"; so that one may say that these systems all operate by the suggestion of power. And the power, small or great, comes in various shapes to the individual,—power, as he will tell you, not to "mind" things that used to vex him, power to concentrate his mind, good cheer, good temper—in short, to put it mildly, a firmer, more elastic moral tone.

The most genuinely saintly person I have ever known is a friend of mine now suffering from cancer of the breast—I hope that she may pardon my citing her here as an example of what ideas can do. Her ideas have kept her a practically well woman for months after she should have given up and gone to bed. They have annulled all pain and weakness and given her a cheerful active life, unusually beneficent to others to whom she has afforded help. Her doctors, acquiescing in results they could not understand, have had the good sense to let her go her own way.

How far the mind-cure movement is destined to extend its influence, or what intellectual modifications it may yet undergo, no one can foretell. It is essentially

a religious movement, and to academically nurtured minds its utterances are tasteless and often grotesque enough. It also incurs the natural enmity of medical politicians, and of the whole trades-union wing of that profession. But no unprejudiced observer can fail to recognize its importance as a social phenomenon to-day, and the higher medical minds are already trying to interpret it fairly, and make its power available for their own therapeutic ends.

Dr. Thomas Hyslop, of the great West Riding Asylum in England, said last year to the British Medical Association that the best sleep-producing agent which his practice had revealed to him, was *prayer*. I say this, he added (I am sorry here that I must quote from memory), purely as a medical man. The exercise of prayer, in those who habitually exert it, must be regarded by us doctors as the most adequate and normal of all the pacifiers of the mind and calmers of the nerves.

But in few of us are functions not tied up by the exercise of other functions. Relatively few medical men and scientific men, I fancy, can pray. Few can carry on any living commerce with "God." Yet many of us are well aware of how much freer and abler our lives would be, were such important forms of energizing not sealed up by the critical atmosphere in which we have been reared. There are in every one

potential forms of activity that actually are shunted out from use. Part of the imperfect vitality under which we labor can thus be easily explained. One part of our mind dams up—even *damns* up!—the other parts.

Conscience makes cowards of us all. Social conventions prevent us from telling the truth after the fashion of the heroes and heroines of Bernard Shaw. We all know persons who are models of excellence, but who belong to the extreme philistine type of mind. So deadly is their intellectual respectability that we can't converse about certain subjects at all, can't let our minds play over them, can't even mention them in their presence. I have numbered among my dearest friends persons thus inhibited intellectually, with whom I would gladly have been able to talk freely about certain interests of mine, certain authors, say, as Bernard Shaw, Chesterton, Edward Carpenter, H. G. Wells, but it wouldn't do, it made them too uncomfortable, they wouldn't play, I had to be silent. . . .

I trust that by this time I have said enough to convince the reader both of the truth and of the importance of my thesis. The two questions, first, that of the possible extent of our powers; and, second, that of the various avenues of approach to them, the various keys for unlocking them in diverse individuals, dominate the whole problem of individual and national

education. We need a topography of the limits of human power, similar to the chart which oculists use of the field of human vision. We need also a study of the various types of human being with reference to the different ways in which their energy-reserves may be appealed to and set loose. Biographies and individual experiences of every kind may be drawn upon for evidence here.

*Consciousness and  
Transcendence*





# 9

## A Review of Benjamin Paul Blood's *The Anesthetic Revelation and the Gist of Philosophy* (1874)

### INTRODUCTION

*James was an experimenter in all things—which brings us very quickly to his relationship with nitrous oxide, or laughing gas, which began in the late 1870s. He was introduced to the potential powers of this substance by a man by the name of Benjamin Blood, who published a book entitled The Anesthetic Revelation and the Gist of Philosophy in 1874. James read and reviewed the book immediately, and it wasn't long before he tested Blood's hypothesis.*

*Blood held that philosophy, so intent on explaining why life was deep and rich and meaningful, continually, and by definition, missed the point. An objective, calm accounting of the facts drained life of its vitality and force. On the philosopher's intellectual lab bench, life was dissected, which is to say destroyed*

*rather than understood. If the point of human existence is to see things more clearly, more expansively, more personally, Blood recommended another course. “Coming to” or regaining consciousness after the “trip” of anesthesia, according to Blood, granted insight into the nature of reality that could rarely be experienced in our normal waking hours. After similar experiments, James echoed Blood’s findings, but also made what we take to be a more profound point about consciousness and transcendence.*

*Most of us, most of the time, are only half awake to life. We see the world through a glass darkly and allow our immediate surroundings to narrowly circumscribe our vision. We confuse the immediate with the profound. We see the world as a reflection of ourselves, which is to say in miniature. Philosophers are not any different in this. If anything, lovers of wisdom are a whole lot worse at seeing the world as it is than your average thoughtful adult. James saw Blood’s insight regarding revelation and transcendence as a way to experience reality’s utter fullness, which is at least one important objective in living a meaningful human life.*

*The reader should keep in mind that James was in his early thirties when he wrote this review. That being said, in it one can recognize something of his later thought. The exercising of the will and intentional*

*activity are essential aspects of being a well-adjusted adult. But receptivity and insight are equally important. Taking in the world in a particular way, in a way that is open and responsive to nuance and grandeur, can have a life-and-death significance, especially when one can see no way forward. Promethean activity can take one only so far in certain moments of crisis. At these points, it may be best to see things differently—or realize that it is at least possible. Blood's consciousness-altering experiments are a testament to this insight.*



What we are, we are! Fear not, gentle reader, we are only thus beginning to give you a brief account of *The Anesthetic Revelation*, a privately printed pamphlet which its author has sent us. What we are, we are, whether we be aware of it or not! The stuff of which we and our universe are made cannot be helped by knowledge. Her use is to forestall contingencies; but in Being, nothing is contingent. It shall be what it always was; whether for weal or woe its inmost equality or meaning is already, nor can all our complacent recognition confirm or clinch it, “or all our tears wash out a word of it.” This utterance of practical sense has helped to bring the metaphysical craving into disrepute,

as being a morbid overgrowth of intellectual activity; whilst more subtle reasons still are making some minds condemn it as an essentially hopeless passion. Among these latter stands Mr. Blood, who, however, frees himself from philosophy only as many others have done, by wading deeply through, and thereby exposing himself to the scornful eyes of the sound-minded and practical crew as one of the other visionary sort. More indeed than visionary,—crack-brained, will be the verdict of most readers, when they hear that he has found a mystical substitute for the answer which philosophy seeks; and that this substitute is the sort of ontological intuition, beyond the power of words to tell of, which one experiences while taking nitrous oxide gas and other anesthetics.

After experiments ranging over nearly fourteen years I affirm—what any man may prove at will—that there is an invariable and reliable condition (or uncondition) ensuing about the instant of recall from anesthetic stupor to sensible observation, or “coming to,” *in which the genius of being is revealed*; but because it cannot be remembered in the normal condition it is lost altogether through the infrequency of anesthetic treatment in any individual’s case ordinarily, and buried, amid the hum of returning common sense, under that epitaph of all illumination:

This is a queer world. . . . To minds of sanguine imagination there will be a sadness in the tenor of the mystery, as if the key-note of the universe were low,—for no poetry, no emotion known to the normal sanity of man can furnish a hint of its primeval prestige, and its all-but appalling solemnity; but for such as have felt sadly the instability of temporal things there is a comfort of serenity and ancient peace; while for the resolved and imperious spirit there are majesty and supremacy unspeakable.

So glorious does this solution of the world's mystery seem to him, that he rises to this flight of rhetoric, which will seem grand or funny according to the disposition of the reader: "My worldly tribulation reclines on its divine composure; and though not in haste to die, I 'care not to be dead,' but look into the future with serene and changeless cheer. This world is no more than alien terror which was taught me."

Now, although we are more than skeptical of the importance of Mr. Blood's so-called discovery, we shall not howl with the wolves or join the multitude in jeering at it. *Nirvana*, whether called by that name or not, has been conceived and represented as the consummation of life too often not to have some meaning; and the state without discrimination, the "informal consciousness," the "being in a meaning prior to

and deeper than manifestation in form” of our author seems to be the same as nirvana. Every one has felt the proverb, “*In vino veritas*,” to have a deeper meaning than the common interpretation, that the mask falls from the drinker’s character. Ontological emotion, however stumbled on, has something authoritative for the individual who feels it. But the worst of all mystical or simply personal knowledge is its incommunicability. To the mere affirmation, “I *know* that this is truth, therefore believe it!” the still more simple reply, “I *won’t!*” is legitimate and conclusive for the time. The intellect, with its classifications and roundabout substitutions, must after all be clung to as the only organ of agreement between men. But when a man comes forward with a mystical experience of his own, the duty of the intellect towards it is not suppression but interpretation. Interpretation of the phenomenon Mr. Blood describes is yet deficient. But we may be sure of one thing now: that even on the hypothesis of its containing all the “revelation” he asserts, laughing-gas intoxication would not be the final way of getting at that revelation. What blunts the mind and weakens the will is no full channel for truth, even if it assist us to a view of a certain aspect of it; and mysticism *versus* mysticism, the faith that comes of willing, the intoxication of moral volition, has a million times better credentials.

The greater part of the pamphlet, in which he ratiocinatively explains the gist of all philosophy to be its own insufficiency to comprehend or in any way state the All, is marked by acuteness of thought and often great felicity of style; though it sins by obscurity through a quaint density of expression, and by such verbal monsters as *spacical* instead of spatial. We can enter into it no further than to say that the common run of believers in the “relativity” of knowledge, who feel as if the imbecility of the latter were due to its bounds and not to its essence (which is to duplicate Being in an Other, namely, Thought), will find here the view argued interestingly that the trouble all comes of a gratuitous guest; that the mystery we feel challenged to resolve, and baffled at not resolving, is no mystery if we decline the challenge; in other words, that fullness of life (unreflected on) forestalls the need of philosophy by being in itself “what we must confess as practical somewhere, namely, an apodal sufficiency,—to which sufficiency a wonder or a fear of why it is sufficient cannot pertain, and could be attributed to it only as an impossible disease or lack.” The secret of Being, in short, is not in the dark immensity beyond knowledge, but at home, this side, beneath the feet, and overlooked by knowledge.

# 10

## “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” (1899)

### INTRODUCTION

*James placed “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings,” a talk that he had given repeatedly since 1892, at the center of his Talk to Teachers, published first in 1899. Scholars have often criticized James for not being socially minded enough, for letting his individualism—the sense that what is most important are the lives of individuals—trump any broader concern for the social and political realm. “On a Certain Blindness” stands as a firm rebuttal of this interpretation. James’s philosophy was individualistic—this much is true—but his philosophy entailed what James would come to term a “pluralism” about values and meaning.*

*The “blindness” to which James refers in this selection is the inability of each of us to see beyond our own, very limited, perspective, and a corresponding failure to acknowledge the inner lives of others who live just beyond what David Foster Wallace called*

*“our tiny skull-sized kingdoms.” James, in a moment of meaningful confession, admits that he was afflicted with precisely this shortsightedness. On a trip to the country, he recounts passing a number of small houses that were not up to the standards of his Irving Street home in Cambridge. He immediately derided what he took to be the shabby conditions of the community, imposing his upper-middle-class tastes on a neighborhood he neither understood nor respected. A significant moment in our moral life is the realization that others find meaning and beauty each in their own way, and that it is impossible for us to understand fully the richness and depth of someone else’s choices and preferences. This stands as a type of epistemic humility (meaning that we admit that our angle of vision is limited) and is the cornerstone of James’s moral pluralism. Note, however, that James’s pluralism was an ideal and not, as some parts of his essay demonstrate, entirely his practice.*

*“On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” does not express the unconditional utopian view that everyone should just get along or that everyone deserves respect. That view might be superior to others, but it isn’t James’s point. His objective was to argue that one errs, sometimes grievously, when one assumes to exhaustively understand and then pass judgment on the lives of others. Regarding the essay,*

*he would later write, “It is more than the mere piece of sentimentalism which it may seem to some readers. It connects itself with a definite view of the world and of our moral relations to the same . . . the truth is too great for any one actual mind, even though that mind be dubbed ‘the Absolute,’ to know the whole of it. There is no point of view absolutely public and universal. Private and uncommunicable perceptions always remain over, and the worst of it is that those who look for them from the outside never know where.” That is a good reminder for any age that tends toward polarization, factionalism, and fracture.*



Our judgments concerning the worth of things, big or little, depend on the *feelings* the things arouse in us. Where we judge a thing to be precious in consequence of the idea we frame of it, this is only because the idea is itself associated already with a feeling. If we were radically feelingless, and if ideas were the only things our mind could entertain, we should lose all our likes and dislikes at a stroke, and be unable to point to any one situation or experience in life more valuable or significant than any other.

Now the blindness in human beings, of which this discourse will treat, is the blindness with which we all are afflicted in regard to the feelings of creatures and people different from ourselves.

We are practical beings, each of us with limited functions and duties to perform. Each is bound to feel intensely the importance of his own duties and the significance of the situations that call these forth. But this feeling is in each of us a vital secret, for sympathy with which we vainly look to others. The others are too much absorbed in their own vital secrets to take an interest in ours. Hence the stupidity and injustice of our opinions, so far as they deal with the significance of alien lives. Hence the falsity of our judgments, so far as they presume to decide in an absolute way on the value of other persons' conditions or ideals.

Take our dogs and ourselves, connected as we are by a tie more intimate than most ties in this world; and yet, outside of that tie of friendly fondness, how insensible, each of us, to all that makes life significant for the other!—we to the rapture of bones under hedges, or smells of trees and lamp-posts, they to the delights of literature and art. As you sit reading the most moving romance you ever fell upon, what sort of a judge is your fox-terrier of your behavior? With

all his good will toward you, the nature of your conduct is absolutely excluded from his comprehension. To sit there like a senseless statue, when you might be taking him to walk and throwing sticks for him to catch! What queer disease is this that comes over you every day, of holding things and staring at them like that for hours together, paralyzed of motion and vacant of all conscious life? The African savages came nearer the truth; but they, too, missed it, when they gathered wonderingly round one of our American travellers who, in the interior, had just come into possession of a stray copy of the *New York Commercial Advertiser*, and was devouring it column by column. When he got through, they offered him a high price for the mysterious object; and, being asked for what they wanted it, they said: "For an eye medicine,"—that being the only reason they could conceive of for the protracted bath which he had given his eyes upon its surface.

The spectator's judgment is sure to miss the root of the matter, and to possess no truth. The subject judged knows a part of the world of reality which the judging spectator fails to see, knows more while the spectator knows less; and, wherever there is conflict of opinion and difference of vision, we are bound to believe that the truer side is the side that feels the more, and not the side that feels the less.

Let me take a personal example of the kind that befalls each one of us daily:—

Some years ago, while journeying in the mountains of North Carolina, I passed by a large number of “coves,” as they call them there, or heads of small valleys between the hills, which had been newly cleared and planted. The impression on my mind was one of unmitigated squalor. The settler had in every case cut down the more manageable trees, and left their charred stumps standing. The larger trees he had girdled and killed, in order that their foliage should not cast a shade. He had then built a log cabin, plastering its chinks with clay, and had set up a tall zigzag rail fence around the scene of his havoc, to keep the pigs and cattle out. Finally, he had irregularly planted the intervals between the stumps and trees with Indian corn, which grew among the chips; and there he dwelt with his wife and babes—an axe, a gun, a few utensils, and some pigs and chickens feeding in the woods, being the sum total of his possessions.

The forest had been destroyed; and what had ‘improved’ it out of existence was hideous, a sort of ulcer, without a single element of artificial grace to make up for the loss of Nature’s beauty. Ugly, indeed, seemed the life of the squatter, scudding, as the sailors say, under bare poles, beginning again away back where our first ancestors started, and by hardly a single item

the better off for all the achievements of the intervening generations.

Talk about going back to nature! I said to myself, oppressed by the dreariness, as I drove by. Talk of a country life for one's old age and for one's children! Never thus, with nothing but the bare ground and one's bare hands to fight the battle! Never, without the best spoils of culture woven in! The beauties and commodities gained by the centuries are sacred. They are our heritage and birthright. No modern person ought to be willing to live a day in such a state of rudimentariness and denudation.

Then I said to the mountaineer who was driving me, "What sort of people are they who have to make these new clearings?" "All of us," he replied. "Why, we ain't happy here, unless we are getting one of these coves under cultivation." I instantly felt that I had been losing the whole inward significance of the situation. Because to me the clearings spoke of naught but denudation, I thought that to those whose sturdy arms and obedient axes had made them they could tell no other story. But, when *they* looked on the hideous stumps, what they thought of was personal victory. The chips, the girdled trees, and the vile split rails spoke of honest sweat, persistent toil and final reward. The cabin was a warrant of safety for self and wife and babes. In short, the clearing, which to me

was a mere ugly picture on the retina, was to them a symbol redolent with moral memories and sang a very pæan of duty, struggle, and success.

I had been as blind to the peculiar ideality of their conditions as they certainly would also have been to the ideality of mine, had they had a peep at my strange indoor academic ways of life at Cambridge.

Wherever a process of life communicates an eagerness to him who lives it, there the life becomes genuinely significant. Sometimes the eagerness is more knit up with the motor activities, sometimes with the perceptions, sometimes with the imagination, sometimes with reflective thought. But, wherever it is found, there is the zest, the tingle, the excitement of reality; and there *is* ‘importance’ in the only real and positive sense in which importance ever anywhere can be. . . .

[. . . W]e are but finite, and each one of us has some single specialized vocation of his own. And it seems as if energy in the service of its particular duties might be got only by hardening the heart toward everything unlike them. Our deadness toward all but one particular kind of joy would thus be the price we inevitably have to pay for being practical creatures. Only in some pitiful dreamer, some philosopher, poet, or romancer, or when the common practical man becomes a lover, does the hard externality give way, and a gleam of insight into the ejactive world, as Clifford

called it, the vast world of inner life beyond us, so different from that of outer seeming, illuminate our mind. Then the whole scheme of our customary values gets confounded, then our self is riven and its narrow interests fly to pieces, then a new centre and a new perspective must be found.

The change is well described by my colleague, Josiah Royce:

What, then, is our neighbor? Thou hast regarded his thought, his feeling, as somehow different from thine. Thou hast said, “A pain in him is not like a pain in me, but something far easier to bear.” He seems to thee a little less living than thou; his life is dim, it is cold, it is a pale fire beside thy own burning desires. . . . So, dimly and by instinct hast thou lived with thy neighbor, and hast known him not, being blind. Thou hast made [of him] a thing, no Self at all. Have done with this illusion, and simply try to learn the truth. Pain is pain, joy is joy, everywhere, even as in thee. . . .

This higher vision of an inner significance in what, until then, we had realized only in the dead external way, often comes over a person suddenly; and, when it does so, it makes an epoch in his history. As Emerson says, there is a depth in those moments that constrains us to ascribe more reality to them than to all

other experiences. The passion of love will shake one like an explosion, or some act will awaken a remorseful compunction that hangs like a cloud over all one's later day.

This mystic sense of hidden meaning starts upon us often from non-human natural things. I take this passage from *Obermann*, a French novel that had some vogue in its day:

Paris, March 7.—It was dark and rather cold. I was gloomy, and walked because I had nothing to do. I passed by some flowers placed breast-high upon a wall. A jonquil in bloom was there. It is the strongest expression of desire: it was the first perfume of the year. I felt all the happiness destined for man. This unutterable harmony of souls, the phantom of the ideal world, arose in me complete. I never felt anything so great or so instantaneous. I know not what shape, what analogy, what secret of relation it was that made me see in this flower a limitless beauty. . . . I shall never enclose in a conception this power, this immensity that nothing will express; this form that nothing will contain; this ideal of a better world which one feels, but which it would seem that nature has not made. . . .

Richard Jefferies has written a remarkable auto-biographic document entitled *The Story of my Heart*.

It tells, in many pages, of the rapture with which in youth the sense of the life of nature filled him. On a certain hill-top he says:—

I was utterly alone with the sun and the earth. Lying down on the grass, I spoke in my soul to the earth, the sun, the air, and the distant sea, far beyond sight. . . . With all the intensity of feeling which exalted me, all the intense communion I held with the earth, the sun and sky, the stars hidden by the light, with the ocean,—in no manner can the thrilling depth of these feelings be written,—with these I prayed as if they were the keys of an instrument. . . . The great sun, burning with light, the strong earth,—dear earth,—the warm sky, the pure air, the thought of ocean, the inexpressible beauty of all filled me with a rapture, an ecstasy, an inflatus. With this inflatus, too, I prayed. . . . The prayer, this soul-emotion, was in itself, not for an object: it was a passion. I hid my face in the grass. I was wholly prostrated, I lost myself in the wrestle, I was rapt and carried away. . . . Had any shepherd accidentally seen me lying on the turf, he would only have thought I was resting a few minutes. I made no outward show. Who could have imagined the whirlwind of passion that was going on in me as I reclined there!

Surely, a worthless hour of life, when measured by the usual standards of commercial value. Yet in what other *kind* of value can the preciousness of any hour, made precious by any standard, consist, if it consist not in feelings of excited significance like these, engendered in some one, by what the hour contains?

Yet so blind and dead does the clamor of our own practical interests make us to all other things, that it seems almost as if it were necessary to become worthless as a practical being, if one is to hope to attain to any breadth of insight into the impersonal world of worths as such, to have any perception of life's meaning on a large objective scale. Only your mystic, your dreamer, or your insolvent tramp or loafer, can afford so sympathetic an occupation, an occupation which will change the usual standards of human value in the twinkling of an eye, giving to foolishness a place ahead of power, and laying low in a minute the distinctions which it takes a hard-working conventional man a lifetime to build up. You may be a prophet, at this rate; but you cannot be a worldly success.

Walt Whitman, for instance, is accounted by many of us a contemporary prophet. He abolishes the usual human distinctions, brings all conventionalisms into solution, and loves and celebrates hardly any human attributes save those elementary ones common to all

members of the race. For this he becomes a sort of ideal tramp, a rider on omnibus-tops and ferry-boats, and, considered either practically or academically, a worthless, unproductive being. His verses are but ejaculations—things mostly without subject or verb, a succession of interjections on an immense scale. He felt the human crowd as rapturously as Wordsworth felt the mountains, felt it as an overpoweringly significant presence, simply to absorb one's mind in which should be business sufficient and worthy to fill the days of a serious man. As he crosses Brooklyn ferry, this is what he feels:—

Flood-tide below me! I watch you face to face;  
Clouds of the west! sun there half an hour high! I see  
you also face to face.  
Crowds of men and women attired in the usual  
costumes! how curious you are to me!  
On the ferry-boats, the hundreds and hundreds that  
cross, returning home, are more curious to me than  
you suppose;  
And you that shall cross from shore to shore  
years hence, are more to me, and more in my  
meditations, than you might suppose.  
Others will enter the gates of the ferry, and cross from  
shore to shore;

Others will watch the run of the flood-tide;  
Others will see the shipping of Manhattan north and  
west, and the heights of Brooklyn to the south and  
east;  
Others will see the islands large and small;  
Fifty years hence, others will see them as they cross,  
the sun half an hour high;  
A hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred years  
hence, others will see them,  
Will enjoy the sunset, the pouring in of the flood-tide,  
the falling back to the sea of the ebb-tide.  
It avails not, neither time or place—distance avails not;  
Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so  
I felt;  
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one  
of a crowd;  
Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river  
and the bright flow,  
I was refresh'd;  
Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with  
the swift current,  
I stood, yet was hurried;  
Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships, and  
the thick-stem'd pipes of steamboats, I look'd.  
I too many and many a time cross'd the river, the sun  
half an hour high;

I watched the Twelfth-month sea-gulls—I saw them  
high in the air, floating with motionless wings,  
oscillating their bodies,  
I saw how the glistening yellow lit up parts of their  
bodies, and left the rest in strong shadow,  
I saw the slow-wheeling circles, and the gradual  
edging toward the south.  
Saw the white sails of schooners and sloops—saw the  
ships at anchor,  
The sailors at work in the rigging, or out astride the  
spars,  
The scallop-edged waves in the twilight, the ladled  
cups, the frolicsome crests and glistening,  
The stretch afar growing dimmer and dimmer, the gray  
walls of the granite store-houses by the docks,  
On the neighboring shore, the fires from the foundry  
chimneys burning high . . . into the night,  
Casting their flicker of black . . . into the clefts of  
streets.  
These, and all else, were to me the same as they are  
to you.

And so on, through the rest of a divinely beautiful poem. And, if you wish to see what this hoary loafer considered the most worthy way of profiting by life's heaven-sent opportunities, read the delicious volume

of his letters to a young car-conductor who had become his friend:—

New York, Oct. 9, 1868.

Dear Pete,—It is splendid here this forenoon—bright and cool. I was out early taking a short walk by the river only two squares from where I live. . . . Shall I tell you about [my life] just to fill up? I generally spend the forenoon in my room writing, etc., then take a bath fix up and go out about twelve and loaf somewhere or call on someone down town or on business, or perhaps if it is very pleasant and I feel like it ride a trip with some driver friend on Broadway from 23rd Street to Bowling Green, three miles each way. (Every day I find I have plenty to do, every hour is occupied with something.) You know it is a never ending amusement and study and recreation for me to ride a couple of hours on a pleasant afternoon on a Broadway stage in this way. You see everything as you pass, a sort of living, endless panorama—shops and splendid buildings and great windows: on the broad sidewalks crowds of women richly dressed continually passing, altogether different, superior in style and looks from any to be seen anywhere else—in fact a perfect stream of people—men too dressed in high style, and plenty of foreigners—and then in the streets

the thick crowd of carriages, stages, carts, hotel and private coaches, and in fact all sorts of vehicles and many first class teams, mile after mile, and the splendor of such a great street and so many tall, ornamental, noble buildings many of them of white marble, and the gayety and motion on every side: you will not wonder how much attraction all this is on a fine day, to a great loafer like me, who enjoys so much seeing the busy world move by him, and exhibiting itself for his amusement, while he takes it easy and just looks on and observes.

Truly a futile way of passing the time, some of you may say, and not altogether creditable to a grown-up man. And yet, from the deepest point of view, who knows the more of truth, and who knows the less,—Whitman on his omnibus-top, full of the inner joy with which the spectacle inspires him, or you, full of the disdain which the futility of his occupation excites?

When your ordinary Brooklynite or New Yorker, leading a life replete with too much luxury, or tired and careworn about his personal affairs, crosses the ferry or goes up Broadway, *his* fancy does not thus “soar away into the colors of the sunset” as did Whitman’s, nor does he inwardly realize at all the indisputable fact that this world never did anywhere or at

any time contain more of essential divinity, or of eternal meaning, than is embodied in the fields of vision over which his eyes so carelessly pass. There is life; and there, a step away, is death. There is the only kind of beauty there ever was. There is the old human struggle and its fruits together. There is the text and the sermon, the real and the ideal in one. But to the jaded and unquickened eye it is all dead and common, pure vulgarism, flatness, and disgust. “Hech! it is a sad sight!” says Carlyle, walking at night with some one who appeals to him to note the splendor of the stars. And that very repetition of the scene to new generations of men in *secula seculorum*, that eternal recurrence of the common order, which so fills a Whitman with mystic satisfaction, is to a Schopenhauer, with the emotional anæsthesia, the feeling of “awful inner emptiness” from out of which he views it all, the chief ingredient of the tedium it instils. What is life on the largest scale, he asks, but the same recurrent inanities, the same dog barking, the same fly buzzing, forevermore? Yet of the kind of fibre of which such inanities consist is the material woven of all the excitements, joys, and meanings that ever were, or ever shall be, in this world.

To be rapt with satisfied attention, like Whitman, to the mere spectacle of the world’s presence, is one way, and the most fundamental way, of confessing

one's sense of its unfathomable significance and importance. But how can one attain to the feeling of the vital significance of an experience, if one have it not to begin with? There is no receipt which one can follow. Being a secret and a mystery, it often comes in mysteriously unexpected ways. It blossoms sometimes from out of the very grave wherein we imagined that our happiness was buried. Benvenuto Cellini, after a life all in the outer sunshine, made of adventures and artistic excitements, suddenly finds himself cast into a dungeon in the Castle of San Angelo. The place is horrible. Rats and wet and mould possess it. His leg is broken and his teeth fall out, apparently with scurvy. But his thoughts turn to God as they have never turned before. He gets a Bible, which he reads during the one hour in the twenty-four in which a wandering ray of daylight penetrates his cavern. He has religious visions. He sings psalms to himself, and composes hymns. And thinking, on the last day of July, of the festivities customary on the morrow in Rome, he says to himself: "All these past years I celebrated this holiday with the vanities of the world: from this year henceforward I will do it with the divinity of God. And then I said to myself, 'Oh, how much more happy I am for this present life of mine than for all those things remembered!'" . . .

The occasion and the experience, then, are nothing. It all depends on the capacity of the soul to be

grasped, to have its life-currents absorbed by what is given. "Crossing a bare common," says Emerson, "in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear."

Life is always worth living, if one have such responsive sensibilities. But we of the highly educated classes (so called) have most of us got far, far away from Nature. We are trained to seek the choice, the rare, the exquisite exclusively, and to overlook the common. We are stuffed with abstract conceptions, and glib with verbalities and verbosities; and in the culture of these higher functions the peculiar sources of joy connected with our simpler functions often dry up, and we grow stone-blind and insensible to life's more elementary and general goods and joys.

The remedy under such conditions is to descend to a more profound and primitive level. To be imprisoned or shipwrecked or forced into the army would permanently show the good of life to many an over-educated pessimist. Living in the open air and on the ground, the lop-sided beam of the balance slowly rises to the level line; and the over-sensibilities and insensibilities even themselves out. The good of all the artificial schemes and fevers fades and pales; and that of seeing, smelling, tasting, sleeping, and daring and doing with one's body, grows and grows. The savages

and children of nature, to whom we deem ourselves so much superior, certainly are alive where we are often dead, along these lines; and, could they write as glibly as we do, they would read us impressive lectures on our impatience for improvement and on our blindness to the fundamental static goods of life. . . .

And now what is the result of all these considerations and quotations? It is negative in one sense, but positive in another. It absolutely forbids us to be forward in pronouncing on the meaninglessness of forms of existence other than our own; and it commands us to tolerate, respect, and indulge those whom we see harmlessly interested and happy in their own ways, however unintelligible these may be to us. Hands off: neither the whole of truth nor the whole of good is revealed to any single observer, although each observer gains a partial superiority of insight from the peculiar position in which he stands. Even prisons and sick-rooms have their special revelations. It is enough to ask of each of us that he should be faithful to his own opportunities and make the most of his own blessings, without presuming to regulate the rest of the vast field.

*Truth and Consequences*





# 11

## “What Pragmatism Means” (1903)

### INTRODUCTION

“*Damn the absolute!*”

*So exclaimed William James one September morning, relaxing on a stone wall with his friend and idealist philosopher Josiah Royce, after a cerebral stroll, and hearing the snap of his daughter Peggy’s camera. “Royce, you’re being photographed! I say, Damn the Absolute!”*

*That, if anything can, sums up James’s pragmatism. To loosen up your philosophical joints, to stretch the mind for a fresh flexibility, and run gauntlets—various tests of various ideas—requires a philosophical training not too tough and not too tender. “Rationalism sticks to logic. . . . Empiricism sticks to the external senses. Pragmatism is willing to take anything, to follow either logic or the senses, and to count the humblest and most personal experiences.” Pragmatism, as James takes it, is plastic and protean, allowing*

*the exercise of our personal freedom and individual differences.*

*James can't give you the God's-eye view of things; he'll suggest many truths, but fix on none. He was a kaleidoscopic example of Emerson's "man of genius," who "inspires us with a boundless confidence in our own powers." A confidence without bounds is appropriate if capital-T Truth is understood as a vanishing point, an ever-advancing faraway point where everything, every little truth, seems to converge.*

*Yet one can run toward or away from vanishing points; in running toward, more is revealed out of that point; in running away, more is concealed, sucked back into that point. So run forward, urges James. Damn the thought that you will ever catch the "final" convergence of all truths! The incoming views of running forward are worth the exertion. They show you mountains where you expected valleys, or deserts where you expected forests. The runner's predictive powers strengthen as they track, cognitively and kinesthetically, whatever flows outward, concentrically, from that vast and free horizon. The runner, by running, becomes the living embodiment of the horizon's changes. Those changes transform into the runner's habits of breath, speed, and step. With every step, the runner is tested. Our truth-talk, too, is*

*endlessly tested by our moving forward through the world.*

*The pragmatist signs up for all the tests: logical, sensory, personal, and so on. “My belief in the Absolute, based on the good it does me,” writes James, using “belief” hypothetically, “must run the gauntlet of all my other beliefs.” One’s body of ever-dying, ever-repairing beliefs, or proto-beliefs, is kept in shape by running such obstacle courses. It is strenuous, for sure, but you’re free to take a break at any time, or a “moral holiday,” says James (still a tender guy). But beware: as with the physical body, so with the philosophical body: to let off the exertions, to lay claim to the whole horizon, the absolute, and sit down, satisfied, is the beginning of atrophy.*



Some years ago, being with a camping party in the mountains, I returned from a solitary ramble to find everyone engaged in a ferocious metaphysical dispute. The corpus of the dispute was a squirrel—a live squirrel supposed to be clinging to one side of a tree-trunk; while over against the tree’s opposite side a human being was imagined to stand. This human witness tries to get sight of the squirrel by moving

rapidly round the tree, but no matter how fast he goes, the squirrel moves as fast in the opposite direction, and always keeps the tree between himself and the man, so that never a glimpse of him is caught. The resultant metaphysical problem now is this: *Does the man go round the squirrel or not?* He goes round the tree, sure enough, and the squirrel is on the tree; but does he go round the squirrel? In the unlimited leisure of the wilderness, discussion had been worn threadbare. Everyone had taken sides, and was obstinate; and the numbers on both sides were even. Each side, when I appeared, therefore appealed to me to make it a majority. Mindful of the scholastic adage that whenever you meet a contradiction you must make a distinction, I immediately sought and found one, as follows: "Which party is right," I said, "depends on what you *practically mean* by 'going round' the squirrel. If you mean passing from the north of him to the east, then to the south, then to the west, and then to the north of him again, obviously the man does go round him, for he occupies these successive positions. But if on the contrary you mean being first in front of him, then on the right of him, then behind him, then on his left, and finally in front again, it is quite as obvious that the man fails to go round him, for by the compensating movements the squirrel

makes, he keeps his belly turned towards the man all the time, and his back turned away. Make the distinction, and there is no occasion for any farther dispute. You are both right and both wrong according as you conceive the verb ‘to go round’ in one practical fashion or the other.”

Although one or two of the hotter disputants called my speech a shuffling evasion, saying they wanted no quibbling or scholastic hair-splitting, but meant just plain honest English “round,” the majority seemed to think that the distinction had assuaged the dispute.

I tell this trivial anecdote because it is a peculiarly simple example of what I wish now to speak of as *the pragmatic method*. The pragmatic method is primarily a method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable. Is the world one or many?—fated or free?—material or spiritual?—here are notions either of which may or may not hold good of the world; and disputes over such notions are unending. The pragmatic method in such cases is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle. Whenever a

dispute is serious, we ought to be able to show some practical difference that must follow from one side or the other's being right.

A glance at the history of the idea will show you still better what pragmatism means. The term is derived from the same Greek word *πρᾶγμα*, meaning action, from which our words “practice” and “practical” come. It was first introduced into philosophy by Mr. Charles Peirce in 1878. In an article entitled “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” in the *Popular Science Monthly* for January of that year Mr. Peirce, after pointing out that our beliefs are really rules for action, said that to develop a thought’s meaning, we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce: that conduct is for us its sole significance. And the tangible fact at the root of all our thought-distinctions, however subtle, is that there is no one of them so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice. To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then, we need only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve—what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare. Our conception of these effects, whether immediate or remote, is then for us the whole of our conception of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance at all.

This is the principle of Peirce, the principle of pragmatism. It lay entirely unnoticed by anyone for twenty years, until I, in an address before Professor Howison's philosophical union at the University of California, brought it forward again and made a special application of it to religion. By that date (1898) the times seemed ripe for its reception. The word "pragmatism" spread, and at present it fairly spots the pages of the philosophic journals. On all hands we find the "pragmatic movement" spoken of, sometimes with respect, sometimes with contumely, seldom with clear understanding. It is evident that the term applies itself conveniently to a number of tendencies that hitherto have lacked a collective name, and that it has "come to stay."

To take in the importance of Peirce's principle, one must get accustomed to applying it to concrete cases. I found a few years ago that Ostwald, the illustrious Leipzig chemist, had been making perfectly distinct use of the principle of pragmatism in his lectures on the philosophy of science, though he had not called it by that name.

"All realities influence our practice," he wrote me, "and that influence is their meaning for us. I am accustomed to put questions to my classes in this way: In what respects would the world be different if this alternative or that were true? If I can find nothing that

would become different, then the alternative has no sense."

That is, the rival views mean practically the same thing, and meaning, other than practical, there is for us none. Ostwald in a published lecture gives this example of what he means. Chemists have long wrangled over the inner constitution of certain bodies called "tautomerous." Their properties seemed equally consistent with the notion that an instable hydrogen atom oscillates inside of them, or that they are instable mixtures of two bodies. Controversy raged; but never was decided.

"It would never have begun," says Ostwald, "if the combatants had asked themselves what particular experimental fact could have been made different by one or the other view being correct. For it would then have appeared that no difference of fact could possibly ensue; and the quarrel was as unreal as if, theorizing in primitive times about the raising of dough by yeast, one party should have invoked a 'brownie,' while another insisted on an 'elf' as the true cause of the phenomenon."

It is astonishing to see how many philosophical disputes collapse into insignificance the moment you subject them to this simple test of tracing a concrete consequence. There can *be* no difference anywhere that doesn't *make* a difference elsewhere—no differ-

ence in abstract truth that doesn't express itself in a difference in concrete fact and in conduct consequent upon that fact, imposed on somebody, somehow, somewhere and somewhen. The whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one.

There is absolutely nothing new in the pragmatic method. Socrates was an adept at it. Aristotle used it methodically. Locke, Berkeley and Hume made momentous contributions to truth by its means. Shadworth Hodgson keeps insisting that realities are only what they are "known-as." But these forerunners of pragmatism used it in fragments: they were preluders only. Not until in our time has it generalized itself, become conscious of a universal mission, pretended to a conquering destiny. I believe in that destiny, and I hope I may end by inspiring you with my belief.

Pragmatism represents a perfectly familiar attitude in philosophy, the empiricist attitude, but it represents it, as it seems to me, both in a more radical and in a less objectionable form than it has ever yet assumed. A pragmatist turns his back resolutely and once for all upon a lot of inveterate habits dear to professional philosophers. He turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad a priori

reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action, and towards power. That means the empiricist temper regnant, and the rationalist temper sincerely given up. It means the open air and possibilities of nature, as against dogma, artificiality and the pretence of finality in truth.

At the same time it does not stand for any special results. It is a method only. But the general triumph of that method would mean an enormous change in what I called in my last lecture the “temperament” of philosophy. Teachers of the ultra-rationalistic type would be frozen out, much as the courtier type is frozen out in republics, as the ultramontane type of priest is frozen out in Protestant lands. Science and metaphysics would come much nearer together, would in fact work absolutely hand in hand.

Metaphysics has usually followed a very primitive kind of quest. You know how men have always hankered after unlawful magic, and you know what a great part, in magic, *words* have always played. If you have his name, or the formula of incantation that binds him, you can control the spirit, genie, afrite, or whatever the power may be. Solomon knew the names of all the spirits, and having their names, he held them subject to his will. So the universe has always ap-

peared to the natural mind as a kind of enigma, of which the key must be sought in the shape of some illuminating or power-bringing word or name. That word names the universe's *principle*, and to possess it is, after a fashion, to possess the universe itself. "God," "Matter," "Reason," "the Absolute," "Energy," are so many solving names. You can rest when you have them. You are at the end of your metaphysical quest.

But if you follow the pragmatic method, you cannot look on any such word as closing your quest. You must bring out of each word its practical cash-value, set it at work within the stream of your experience. It appears less as a solution, then, than as a program for more work, and more particularly as an indication of the ways in which existing realities may be *changed*.

*Theories thus become instruments, not answers to enigmas, in which we can rest.* We don't lie back upon them, we move forward, and, on occasion, make nature over again by their aid. Pragmatism unstiffens all our theories, limbers them up and sets each one at work. Being nothing essentially new, it harmonizes with many ancient philosophic tendencies. It agrees with nominalism for instance, in always appealing to particulars; with utilitarianism in emphasizing practical aspects; with positivism in its disdain for

verbal solutions, useless questions, and metaphysical abstractions.

All these, you see, are *anti-intellectualist* tendencies. Against rationalism as a pretension and a method, pragmatism is fully armed and militant. But, at the outset, at least, it stands for no particular results. It has no dogmas, and no doctrines save its method. As the young Italian pragmatist Papini has well said, it lies in the midst of our theories, like a corridor in a hotel. Innumerable chambers open out of it. In one you may find a man writing an atheistic volume; in the next someone on his knees praying for faith and strength; in a third a chemist investigating a body's properties. In a fourth a system of idealistic metaphysics is being excogitated; in a fifth the impossibility of metaphysics is being shown. But they all own the corridor, and all must pass through it if they want a practicable way of getting into or out of their respective rooms.

No particular results then, so far, but only an attitude of orientation, is what the pragmatic method means. *The attitude of looking away from first things, principles, "categories," supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts.*

So much for the pragmatic method! . . .

The pragmatist clings to facts and concreteness, observes truth at its work in particular cases, and generalizes. Truth, for him, becomes a class-name for all sorts of definite working-values in experience. For the rationalist it remains a pure abstraction, to the bare name of which we must defer. When the pragmatist undertakes to show in detail just WHY we must defer, the rationalist is unable to recognize the concretes from which his own abstraction is taken. He accuses us of *denying* truth; whereas we have only sought to trace exactly why people follow it and always ought to follow it. Your typical ultra-abstractionist fairly shudders at concreteness: other things equal, he positively prefers the pale and spectral. If the two universes were offered, he would always choose the skinny outline rather than the rich thicket of reality. It is so much purer, clearer, nobler.

I hope that as these lectures go on, the concreteness and closeness to facts of the pragmatism which they advocate may be what approves itself to you as its most satisfactory peculiarity. It only follows here the example of the sister-sciences, interpreting the unobserved by the observed. It brings old and new harmoniously together. It converts the absolutely empty notion of a static relation of "correspondence" (what that may mean we must ask later) between our minds

and reality, into that of a rich and active commerce (that anyone may follow in detail and understand) between particular thoughts of ours, and the great universe of other experiences in which they play their parts and have their uses. . . .

I wish now to add a word in further explanation of the claim I made at our last meeting, that pragmatism may be a happy harmonizer of empiricist ways of thinking, with the more religious demands of human beings. . . .

Now pragmatism, devoted though she be to facts, has no such materialistic bias as ordinary empiricism labors under. Moreover, she has no objection whatever to the realizing of abstractions, so long as you get about among particulars with their aid and they actually carry you somewhere. Interested in no conclusions but those which our minds and our experiences work out together, she has no a priori prejudices against theology. *If theological ideals prove to have a value for concrete life, they will be true, for pragmatism, in the sense of being good for so much. For how much more they are true, will depend entirely on their relations to the other truths that also have to be acknowledged.* . . .

What do believers in the Absolute mean by saying that their belief affords them comfort? They mean that since in the Absolute finite evil is “overruled”

already, we may, therefore, whenever we wish, treat the temporal as if it were potentially the eternal, be sure that we can trust its outcome, and, without sin, dismiss our fear and drop the worry of our finite responsibility. In short, they mean that we have a right ever and anon to take a moral holiday, to let the world wag in its own way, feeling that its issues are in better hands than ours and are none of our business.

The universe is a system of which the individual members may relax their anxieties occasionally, in which the don't-care mood is also right for men, and moral holidays in order—that, if I mistake not, is part, at least, of what the Absolute is “known-as,” that is the great difference in our particular experiences which his being true makes for us, that is part of his cash-value when he is pragmatically interpreted. Farther than that the ordinary lay-reader in philosophy who thinks favorably of absolute idealism does not venture to sharpen his conceptions. He can use the Absolute for so much, and so much is very precious. He is pained at hearing you speak incredulously of the Absolute, therefore, and disregards your criticisms because they deal with aspects of the conception that he fails to follow.

If the Absolute means this, and means no more than this, who can possibly deny the truth of it? To

deny it would be to insist that men should never relax, and that holidays are never in order. . . .

My belief in the Absolute, based on the good it does me, must run the gauntlet of all my other beliefs. Grant that it may be true in giving me a moral holiday. Nevertheless, as I conceive it,—and let me speak now confidentially, as it were, and merely in my own private person,—it clashes with other truths of mine whose benefits I hate to give up on its account . . . I find that it entangles me in metaphysical paradoxes that are unacceptable, etc., etc. But as I have enough trouble in life already without adding the trouble of carrying these intellectual inconsistencies, I personally just give up the Absolute. I just *take* my moral holidays; or else as a professional philosopher, I try to justify them by some other principle. . . .

You see by this what I meant when I called pragmatism a mediator and reconciler and said, borrowing the word from Papini, that she unstiffens our theories. She has in fact no prejudices whatever, no obstructive dogmas, no rigid canons of what shall count as proof. She is completely genial. She will entertain any hypothesis, she will consider any evidence. It follows that in the religious field she is at a great advantage both over positivistic empiricism, with its anti-theological bias, and over religious rationalism,

with its exclusive interest in the remote, the noble, the simple, and the abstract in the way of conception.

In short, she widens the field of search for God. Rationalism sticks to logic and the empyrean. Empiricism sticks to the external senses. Pragmatism is willing to take anything, to follow either logic or the senses, and to count the humblest and most personal experiences. She will count mystical experiences if they have practical consequences. She will take a God who lives in the very dirt of private fact, if that should seem a likely place to find him.

Her only test of probable truth is what works best in the way of leading us, what fits every part of life best and combines with the collectivity of experience's demands, nothing being omitted. If theological ideas should do this, if the notion of God, in particular, should prove to do it, how could pragmatism possibly deny God's existence? She could see no meaning in treating as "not true" a notion that was pragmatically so successful. What other kind of truth could there be, for her, than all this agreement with concrete reality?

# 12

## “The Moral Equivalent of War” (1903)

### INTRODUCTION

*James never went to war. His two brothers, Bob and Wilkie, did, and witnessed at close quarters the violence of the Civil War in the Sea Islands campaign off coastal South Carolina and Georgia. Louis Menand argues that the Civil War was a catalyst for American pragmatism, that the conflict, fueled by ideology and big ideas, encouraged pragmatists such as James to develop a more modest position on the nature of truth and ideas, that ideas must be tested and retested before rash conclusions are made. According to pragmatism, truth had to suffer its hard knocks before it was valorized. Whether this is true is debatable (there are other factors that led to pragmatism’s formation), but what seems clear is that Menand’s thesis holds when it comes to James’s “The Moral Equivalent of War.”*

*“The Moral Equivalent of War” was given as a speech in 1903 in San Francisco to one of the largest*

*peace organizations in the United States. The audience was, quite frankly, shocked. The war against war, James argued, was going to be no easy thing. He explained that war had, over the course of human history, provided the necessary glue to hold societies together and circumstances for individuals to strive for a common cause and claim victory. This sentiment was out of tune with James's audience and is undoubtedly out of sync with our sensibilities today. What is valuable about this piece, we believe, is what might be called James's anthropology of war, his diagnoses about what role the "fighting spirit" might have had in the creation of civilization. In a time that risked tipping into luxury and decadence, James expressed caution—life should not become too easy lest we forget what it is to strive and find meaning in struggle.*

*It is important to note that James wanted to provide an alternative or "equivalent" to war, a social and political space where the warring spirit could be channeled and sublimated. He recommended an interesting program of social service in which the "gilded youth" of Ivy League universities and wealthy households would be conscripted to engage in public works. This might be regarded as James's romanticism of manual labor, hearkening back to a time when everyone had to put their back into their own plow. There is probably something to this, but it is*

*also the case that James encouraged men and women from wealthy homes to experience something of another walk of life, one that was far more strenuous than they were used to. This experience, thought James, would have the consequence of providing some insight into American society as a whole, but also knocking dangerously grand ideas down to a more reasonable size.*



The war against war is going to be no holiday excursion or camping party. The military feelings are too deeply grounded to abdicate their place among our ideals until better substitutes are offered than the glory and shame that come to nations as well as to individuals from the ups and downs of politics and the vicissitudes of trade. There is something highly paradoxical in the modern man's relation to war. Ask all our millions, north and south, whether they would vote now (were such a thing possible) to have our war for the Union expunged from history, and the record of a peaceful transition to the present time substituted for that of its marches and battles, and probably hardly a handful of eccentrics would say yes. Those ancestors, those efforts, those memories and legends, are the most ideal part of what we now own together,

a sacred spiritual possession worth more than all the blood poured out. Yet ask those same people whether they would be willing in cold blood to start another civil war now to gain another similar possession, and not one man or woman would vote for the proposition.

In modern eyes, precious though wars may be, they must not be waged solely for the sake of the ideal harvest. Only when forced upon one, only when an enemy's injustice leaves us no alternative, is a war now thought permissible.

It was not thus in ancient times. The earlier men were hunting men, and to hunt a neighboring tribe, kill the males, loot the village and possess the females, was the most profitable, as well as the most exciting, way of living. Thus were the more martial tribes selected, and in chiefs and peoples a pure pugnacity and love of glory came to mingle with the more fundamental appetite for plunder.

Modern war is so expensive that we feel trade to be a better avenue to plunder; but modern man inherits all the innate pugnacity and all the love of glory of his ancestors. Showing war's irrationality and horror is of no effect upon him. The horrors make the fascination. War is the *strong life*; it is life *in extremis*; war-taxes are the only ones men never hesitate to pay, as the budgets of all nations show us.

History is a bath of blood. The *Iliad* is one long recital of how Diomedes and Ajax, Sarpedon and Hector *killed*. No detail of the wounds they made is spared us, and the Greek mind fed upon the story. Greek history is a panorama of jingoism and imperialism—war for war’s sake, all the citizens being warriors. It is horrible reading, because of the irrationality of it all—save for the purpose of making “history”—and the history is that of the utter ruin of a civilization in intellectual respects perhaps the highest the earth has ever seen. . . .

We inherit the warlike type; and for most of the capacities of heroism that the human race is full of we have to thank this cruel history. Dead men tell no tales, and if there were any tribes of other type than this they have left no survivors. Our ancestors have bred pugnacity into our bone and marrow, and thousands of years of peace won’t breed it out of us. The popular imagination fairly fattens on the thought of wars. Let public opinion once reach a certain fighting pitch, and no ruler can withstand it. In the Boer war both governments began with bluff but couldn’t stay there, the military tension was too much for them. In 1898 our people had read the word “war” in letters three inches high for three months in every newspaper. The pliant politician McKinley was swept away by their eagerness, and our squalid war with Spain became a necessity.

At the present day, civilized opinion is a curious mental mixture. The military instincts and ideals are as strong as ever, but are confronted by reflective criticisms which sorely curb their ancient freedom. Innumerable writers are showing up the bestial side of military service. Pure loot and mastery seem no longer morally avowable motives, and pretexts must be found for attributing them solely to the enemy. England and we, our army and navy authorities repeat without ceasing, arm solely for "peace," Germany and Japan it is who are bent on loot and glory. "Peace" in military mouths to-day is a synonym for "war expected." The word has become a pure provocative, and no government wishing peace sincerely should allow it ever to be printed in a newspaper. Every up-to-date dictionary should say that "peace" and "war" mean the same thing, now *in posse*, now *in actu*. It may even reasonably be said that the intensely sharp competitive *preparation* for war by the nations is the *real war*, permanent, unceasing; and that the battles are only a sort of public verification of the mastery gained during the "peace"-interval.

It is plain that on this subject civilized man has developed a sort of double personality. If we take European nations, no legitimate interest of any one of them would seem to justify the tremendous destructions which a war to compass it would necessarily entail. It would seem as though common sense and reason

ought to find a way to reach agreement in every conflict of honest interests. I myself think it our bounden duty to believe in such international rationality as possible. But, as things stand, I see how desperately hard it is to bring the peace-party and the war-party together, and I believe that the difficulty is due to certain deficiencies in the program of pacifism which set the militarist imagination strongly, and to a certain extent justifiably, against it. In the whole discussion both sides are on imaginative and sentimental ground. It is but one utopia against another, and everything one says must be abstract and hypothetical. Subject to this criticism and caution, I will try to characterize in abstract strokes the opposite imaginative forces, and point out what to my own very fallible mind seems the best Utopian hypothesis, the most promising line of conciliation.

In my remarks, pacifist though I am, I will refuse to speak of the bestial side of the war-régime (already done justice to by many writers) and consider only the higher aspects of militaristic sentiment. Patriotism no one thinks discreditable; nor does any one deny that war is the romance of history. But inordinate ambitions are the soul of every patriotism, and the possibility of violent death the soul of all romance. The militarily patriotic and romantic-minded everywhere, and especially the professional military class, refuse to

admit for a moment that war may be a transitory phenomenon in social evolution. The notion of a sheep's paradise like that revolts, they say, our higher imagination. Where then would be the steeps of life? If war had ever stopped, we should have to re-invent it, on this view, to redeem life from flat degeneration. . . .

Other militarists are more complex and more moral in their considerations. The *Philosophie des Krieges* by S. R. Steinmetz is a good example. War, according to this author, is an ordeal instituted by God, who weighs the nations in its balance. It is the essential form of the State, and the only function in which peoples can employ all their powers at once and convergently. No victory is possible save as the resultant of a totality of virtues, no defeat for which some vice or weakness is not responsible. Fidelity, cohesiveness, tenacity, heroism, conscience, education, inventiveness, economy, wealth, physical health and vigor—there isn't a moral or intellectual point of superiority that doesn't tell, when God holds his assizes and hurls the peoples upon one another. *Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht*; and Dr. Steinmetz does not believe that in the long run chance and luck play any part in apportioning the issues.

The virtues that prevail, it must be noted, are virtues anyhow, superiorities that count in peaceful as well as in military competition; but the strain on them,

being infinitely intenser in the latter case, makes war infinitely more searching as a trial. No ordeal is comparable to its winnowings. Its dread hammer is the welder of men into cohesive states, and nowhere but in such states can human nature adequately develop its capacity. The only alternative is “degeneration.”

Dr. Steinmetz is a conscientious thinker, and his book, short as it is, takes much into account. Its upshot can, it seems to me, be summed up in Simon Patten’s word, that mankind was nursed in pain and fear, and that the transition to a “pleasure-economy” may be fatal to a being wielding no powers of defence against its disintegrative influences. If we speak of *the fear of emancipation from the fear-régime*, we put the whole situation into a single phrase; fear regarding ourselves now taking the place of the ancient fear of the enemy.

Turn the fear over as I will in my mind, it all seems to lead back to two unwillingnesses of the imagination, one aesthetic, and the other moral; unwillingness, first to envisage a future in which army-life, with its many elements of charm, shall be forever impossible, and in which the destinies of peoples shall nevermore be decided, quickly, thrillingly, and tragically, by force, but only gradually and insipidly by “evolution”; and, secondly, unwillingness to see the supreme theatre of human strenuousness closed, and the splendid

military aptitudes of men doomed to keep always in a state of latency and never show themselves in action. These insistent unwillingnesses, no less than other aesthetic and ethical insistencies, have, it seems to me, to be listened to and respected. One cannot meet them effectively by mere counter-insistency on war's expensiveness and horror. The horror makes the thrill; and when the question is of getting the extremest and supremest out of human nature, talk of expense sounds ignominious. The weakness of so much merely negative criticism is evident—pacifism makes no converts from the military party. The military party denies neither the bestiality nor the horror, nor the expense; it only says that these things tell but half the story. It only says that war is worth them; that, taking human nature as a whole, its wars are its best protection against its weaker and more cowardly self, and that mankind cannot afford to adopt a peace-economy.

Pacificists ought to enter more deeply into the aesthetical and ethical point of view of their opponents. Do that first in any controversy, says J. J. Chapman, then *move the point*, and your opponent will follow. So long as anti-militarists propose no substitute for war's disciplinary function, no *moral equivalent* of war, analogous, as one might say, to the mechanical equivalent of heat, so long they fail to realize the full

inwardness of the situation. And as a rule they do fail. The duties, penalties, and sanctions pictured in the Utopias they paint are all too weak and tame to touch the military-minded.

Tolstoi's pacifism is the only exception to this rule, for it is profoundly pessimistic as regards all this world's values, and makes the fear of the Lord furnish the moral spur provided elsewhere by the fear of the enemy. But our socialistic peace-advocates all believe absolutely in this world's values; and instead of the fear of the Lord and the fear of the enemy, the only fear they reckon with is the fear of poverty if one be lazy. This weakness pervades all the socialistic literature with which I am acquainted. Even in Lowes Dickinson's exquisite dialogue, high wages and short hours are the only forces invoked for overcoming man's distaste for repulsive kinds of labor.

Meanwhile men at large still live as they always have lived, under a pain-and-fear economy—for those of us who live in an ease-economy are but an island in the stormy ocean—and the whole atmosphere of present-day Utopian literature tastes mawkish and dishwatery to people who still keep a sense for life's more bitter flavors. It suggests, in truth, ubiquitous inferiority. Inferiority is always with us, and merciless scorn of it is the keynote of the military temper. . . .

Having said thus much in preparation, I will now confess my own Utopia.

I devoutly believe in the reign of peace and in the gradual advent of some sort of a socialistic equilibrium. The fatalistic view of the war-function is to me nonsense, for I know that war-making is due to definite motives and subject to prudential checks and reasonable criticisms, just like any other form of enterprise. And when whole nations are the armies, and the science of destruction vies in intellectual refinement with the sciences of production, I see that war becomes absurd and impossible from its own monstrosity. Extravagant ambitions will have to be replaced by reasonable claims, and nations must make common cause against them. I see no reason why all this should not apply to yellow as well as to white countries, and I look forward to a future when acts of war shall be formally outlawed as between civilized peoples.

All these beliefs of mine put me squarely into the anti-militarist party. But I do not believe that peace either ought to be or will be permanent on this globe, unless the states pacifically organized preserve some of the old elements of army-discipline. A permanently successful peace-economy cannot be a simple pleasure-economy. In the more or less socialistic future towards which mankind seems drifting we must still subject ourselves collectively to those severities which answer to our real position upon this only partly hospitable globe. We must make new energies and hardihoods

continue the manliness to which the military mind so faithfully clings. Martial virtues must be the enduring cement; intrepidity, contempt of softness, surrender of private interest, obedience to command, must still remain the rock upon which states are built—unless, indeed, we wish for dangerous reactions against commonwealths fit only for contempt, and liable to invite attack whenever a centre of crystallization for military-minded enterprise gets formed anywhere in their neighborhood.

The war-party is assuredly right in affirming and reaffirming that the martial virtues, although originally gained by the race through war, are absolute and permanent human goods. Patriotic pride and ambition in their military form are, after all, only specifications of a more general competitive passion. They are its first form, but that is no reason for supposing them to be its last form. Men now are proud of belonging to a conquering nation, and without a murmur they lay down their persons and their wealth, if by so doing they may fend off subjection. But who can be sure that *other aspects of one's country* may not, with time and education and suggestion enough, come to be regarded with similarly effective feelings of pride and shame? Why should men not some day feel that it is worth a blood-tax to belong to a collectivity superior in *any* ideal respect? Why should they not blush

with indignant shame if the community that owns them is vile in any way whatsoever? Individuals, daily more numerous, now feel this civic passion. It is only a question of blowing on the spark till the whole population gets incandescent, and on the ruins of the old morals of military honor, a stable system of morals of civic honor builds itself up. What the whole community comes to believe in grasps the individual as in a vise. The war-function has grasped us so far; but constructive interests may some day seem no less imperative, and impose on the individual a hardly lighter burden.

Let me illustrate my idea more concretely. There is nothing to make one indignant in the mere fact that life is hard, that men should toil and suffer pain. The planetary conditions once for all are such, and we can stand it. But that so many men, by mere accidents of birth and opportunity, should have a life of *nothing else* but toil and pain and hardness and inferiority imposed upon them, should have *no* vacation, while others natively no more deserving never get any taste of this campaigning life at all,—*this* is capable of arousing indignation in reflective minds. It may end by seeming shameful to all of us that some of us have nothing but campaigning, and others nothing but unmanly ease. If now—and this is my idea—there were, instead of military conscription a conscription of the

whole youthful population to form for a certain number of years a part of the army enlisted against *Nature*, the injustice would tend to be evened out, and numerous other goods to the commonwealth would follow. The military ideals of hardihood and discipline would be wrought into the growing fibre of the people; no one would remain blind as the luxurious classes now are blind, to man's relations to the globe he lives on, and to the permanently sour and hard foundations of his higher life. To coal and iron mines, to freight trains, to fishing fleets in December, to dish-washing, clothes-washing, and window-washing, to road-building and tunnel-making, to foundries and stoke-holes, and to the frames of skyscrapers, would our gilded youths be drafted off, according to their choice, to get the childishness knocked out of them, and to come back into society with healthier sympathies and soberer ideas. They would have paid their blood-tax, done their own part in the immemorial human warfare against nature; they would tread the earth more proudly, the women would value them more highly, they would be better fathers and teachers of the following generation.

Such a conscription, with the state of public opinion that would have required it, and the many moral fruits it would bear, would preserve in the midst of a

pacific civilization the manly virtues which the military party is so afraid of seeing disappear in peace. We should get toughness without callousness, authority with as little criminal cruelty as possible, and painful work done cheerily because the duty is temporary, and threatens not, as now, to degrade the whole remainder of one's life. I spoke of the "moral equivalent" of war. So far, war has been the only force that can discipline a whole community, and until an equivalent discipline is organized, I believe that war must have its way. But I have no serious doubt that the ordinary prides and shames of social man, once developed to a certain intensity, are capable of organizing such a moral equivalent as I have sketched, or some other just as effective for preserving manliness of type. It is but a question of time, of skilful propagandism, and of opinion-making men seizing historic opportunities.

The martial type of character can be bred without war. Strenuous honor and disinterestedness abound elsewhere. Priests and medical men are in a fashion educated to it and we should all feel some degree of it imperative if we were conscious of our work as an obligatory service to the state. We should be *owned*, as soldiers are by the army, and our pride would rise accordingly. We could be poor, then, without humiliation, as

army officers now are. The only thing needed henceforward is to inflame the civic temper as past history has inflamed the military temper. . . .

It would be simply preposterous if the only force that could work ideals of honor and standards of efficiency into English or American natures should be the fear of being killed by the Germans or the Japanese. Great indeed is Fear; but it is not, as our military enthusiasts believe and try to make us believe, the only stimulus known for awakening the higher ranges of men's spiritual energy.

*Wonder and Hope*





# 13

## “Mysticism,” from *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902)

### INTRODUCTION

*Mysticism is the apprehension of knowledge that is inaccessible to the intellect, so it seems a little strange that James spent so much time and brain power trying to understand it. Mysticism was in his blood: his father, Henry James Sr., claimed to have a transformative mystical experience in 1844, two years after William’s birth. Henry “found” the meaning of his experience in the theology of Emmanuel Swedenborg, the eighteenth-century Swedish mystic, calling his experience, in Swedenborgian terms, a “vastation”—an “emptying out” of the body in the face of God. Young William was brought up in a home that took for granted the life of the spirit, and he spent his later life, like his father, trying to make good sense of it.*

*James wrote, in The Varieties of Religious Experience, that mystical experiences possess four key features: ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and*

*passivity. Mystical states are short-lived (transiency), and in them we feel a loss of control (passivity), as if “grasped and held by a superior power.”* Mystical states cannot be represented (ineffability). They cannot be exteriorized—not in language, not in art, not in anything. James compares mystic ineffability to the qualitative state of hearing music, which cannot be “imparted or transferred” to someone who has no experience of hearing. Lastly, mystical states, unlike hearing music or mere feeling, involve a “noetic” quality, from the Greek *noēsis*, which means something like “understanding” or “intellect.”

James holds that mystical noesis “has no specific intellectual content whatever of its own. It is capable of forming matrimonial alliances with material furnished by the most diverse philosophies and theologies.” Mystical experience does not favor “any special belief,” even Swedenborg’s. It is not an object illuminated, but the illumination itself.

Thus mystical consciousness breaks from objective or rational consciousness, from reason’s “laws” of non-contradiction, identity, and sufficient reason. For the sick soul, a break into mystical consciousness may bring reconciliation with life: “opposites of the world, whose contradictoriness and conflict make our difficulties and troubles, [are] melted into unity.” James himself “made some observations on [aspects] of

*nitrous oxide intoxication,” that is, he huffed nitrous oxide, which illuminated for him a cosmic unity-in-opposites. Unfortunately for the sick soul, or any soul, there are also less reconciling mystical experiences, what James calls “diabolical mysticism, a sort of religious mysticism turned upside down. . . . Instead of consolations we have desolations.” There are varieties of mystical experience.*

Like so much of *The Varieties*, the “Mysticism” section overflows with personal accounts, quoted at length, reflecting James’s scientific sensitivity to the first-person view, the subjective in the subject, or, as philosopher Thomas Nagel would say, the view from somewhere. James excerpts reports from Malwida von Meysenbug, a friend of Friedrich Nietzsche, and from Walt Whitman, Saint Teresa, Al-Ghazzali, . . . and, of course, Benjamin Paul Blood. James collates these subjective reports to establish an objective case for recurring, thus trackable, if not examinable, alternate and edifying states of consciousness. An empiricist par excellence, James adhered to the empirical, to our experiences as they are, taking them seriously as scientific matters.

Yet mystical experience, so radically interior, cannot compel the assent of outsiders: “The utmost [mystics] can ever ask of us in this life is to admit that [their experiences] establish a presumption.” That is

*all, a mere presumption, a slight lean that favors the presence of other informative patterns of consciousness. “They open out the possibility of other orders of truth, in which, so far as anything in us vitally responds to them, we may freely continue to have faith.”*

*Here are yet more of James’s tantalizing maybes.*



Over and over again in these lectures I have raised points and left them open and unfinished until we should have come to the subject of Mysticism. Some of you, I fear, may have smiled as you noted my reiterated postponements. But now the hour has come when mysticism must be faced in good earnest, and those broken threads wound up together. One may say truly, I think, that personal religious experience has its root and centre in mystical states of consciousness; so for us, who in these lectures are treating personal experience as the exclusive subject of our study, such states of consciousness ought to form the vital chapter from which the other chapters get their light. Whether my treatment of mystical states will shed more light or darkness, I do not know, for my own constitution shuts me out from their enjoyment almost entirely, and I can speak of them only at sec-

ond hand. But though forced to look upon the subject so externally, I will be as objective and receptive as I can; and I think I shall at least succeed in convincing you of the reality of the states in question, and of the paramount importance of their function.

First of all, then, I ask, What does the expression “mystical states of consciousness” mean? How do we part off mystical states from other states?

The words “mysticism” and “mystical” are often used as terms of mere reproach, to throw at any opinion which we regard as vague and vast and sentimental, and without a base in either facts or logic. For some writers a “mystic” is any person who believes in thought-transference, or spirit-return. Employed in this way the word has little value: there are too many less ambiguous synonyms. So, to keep it useful by restricting it, I will do what I did in the case of the word “religion,” and simply propose to you four marks which, when an experience has them, may justify us in calling it mystical for the purpose of the present lectures. In this way we shall save verbal disputation, and the recriminations that generally go therewith.

1. *Ineffability*.—The handiest of the marks by which I classify a state of mind as mystical is negative. The subject of it immediately says that it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can

be given in words. It follows from this that its quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others. In this peculiarity mystical states are more like states of feeling than like states of intellect. No one can make clear to another who has never had a certain feeling, in what the quality or worth of it consists. One must have musical ears to know the value of a symphony; one must have been in love one's self to understand a lover's state of mind. Lacking the heart or ear, we cannot interpret the musician or the lover justly, and are even likely to consider him weak-minded or absurd. The mystic finds that most of us accord to his experiences an equally incompetent treatment.

2. *Noetic quality*.—Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time.

These two characters will entitle any state to be called mystical, in the sense in which I use the word. Two other qualities are less sharply marked, but are usually found. These are:—

3. *Transiency*.—Mystical states cannot be sustained for long. Except in rare instances, half an hour, or at most an hour or two, seems to be the limit beyond which they fade into the light of common day. Often, when faded, their quality can but imperfectly be reproduced in memory; but when they recur it is recognized; and from one recurrence to another it is susceptible of continuous development in what is felt as inner richness and importance.

4. *Passivity*.—Although the oncoming of mystical states may be facilitated by preliminary voluntary operations, as by fixing the attention, or going through certain bodily performances, or in other ways which manuals of mysticism prescribe; yet when the characteristic sort of consciousness once has set in, the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power. This latter peculiarity connects mystical states with certain definite phenomena of secondary or alternative personality, such as prophetic speech, automatic writing, or the mediumistic trance. When these latter conditions are well pronounced, however, there may be no recollection whatever of the phenomenon, and it may have no significance for the subject's usual inner life, to which, as it were, it makes a mere interruption. Mystical states, strictly so called, are never merely interruptive. Some

memory of their content always remains, and a profound sense of their importance. They modify the inner life of the subject between the times of their recurrence. Sharp divisions in this region are, however, difficult to make, and we find all sorts of gradations and mixtures.

These four characteristics are sufficient to mark out a group of states of consciousness peculiar enough to deserve a special name and to call for careful study. Let it then be called the mystical group.

Our next step should be to gain acquaintance with some typical examples. Professional mystics at the height of their development have often elaborately organized experiences and a philosophy based thereupon. But you remember what I said in my first lecture: phenomena are best understood when placed within their series, studied in their germ and in their over-ripe decay, and compared with their exaggerated and degenerated kindred. The range of mystical experience is very wide, much too wide for us to cover in the time at our disposal. Yet the method of serial study is so essential for interpretation that if we really wish to reach conclusions we must use it. I will begin, therefore, with phenomena which claim no special religious significance, and end with those of which the religious pretensions are extreme.

The simplest rudiment of mystical experience would seem to be that deepened sense of the signifi-

cance of a maxim or formula which occasionally sweeps over one. "I've heard that said all my life," we exclaim, "but I never realized its full meaning until now." "When a fellow-monk," said Luther, "one day repeated the words of the Creed: 'I believe in the forgiveness of sins,' I saw the Scripture in an entirely new light; and straightway I felt as if I were born anew. It was as if I had found the door of paradise thrown wide open." This sense of deeper significance is not confined to rational propositions. Single words, and conjunctions of words, effects of light on land and sea, odors and musical sounds, all bring it when the mind is tuned aright. Most of us can remember the strangely moving power of passages in certain poems read when we were young, irrational doorways as they were through which the mystery of fact, the wilderness and the pang of life, stole into our hearts and thrilled them. The words have now perhaps become mere polished surfaces for us; but lyric poetry and music are alive and significant only in proportion as they fetch these vague vistas of a life continuous with our own, beckoning and inviting, yet ever eluding our pursuit. We are alive or dead to the eternal inner message of the arts according as we have kept or lost this mystical susceptibility.

A more pronounced step forward on the mystical ladder is found in an extremely frequent phenomenon,

that sudden feeling, namely, which sometimes sweeps over us, of having “been here before,” as if at some indefinite past time, in just this place, with just these people, we were already saying just these things. As Tennyson writes:

“Moreover, something is or seems,  
That touches me with mystic gleams,  
Like glimpses of forgotten dreams—

“Of something felt, like something here;  
Of something done, I know not where;  
Such as no language may declare.”

Sir James Crichton-Browne has given the technical name of “dreamy states” to these sudden invasions of vaguely reminiscent consciousness. They bring a sense of mystery and of the metaphysical duality of things, and the feeling of an enlargement of perception which seems imminent but which never completes itself. In Dr. Crichton-Browne’s opinion they connect themselves with the perplexed and scared disturbances of self-consciousness which occasionally precede epileptic attacks. I think that this learned alienist takes a rather absurdly alarmist view of an intrinsically insignificant phenomenon. He follows it along the downward ladder, to insanity; our path pursues the upward ladder chiefly. The divergence shows

how important it is to neglect no part of a phenomenon's connections, for we make it appear admirable or dreadful according to the context by which we set it off. . . .

The next step into mystical states carries us into a realm that public opinion and ethical philosophy have long since branded as pathological, though private practice and certain lyric strains of poetry seem still to bear witness to its ideality. I refer to the consciousness produced by intoxicants and anæsthetics, especially by alcohol. The sway of alcohol over mankind is unquestionably due to its power to stimulate the mystical faculties of human nature, usually crushed to earth by the cold facts and dry criticisms of the sober hour. Sobriety diminishes, discriminates, and says no; drunkenness expands, unites, and says yes. It is in fact the great exciter of the *Yes* function in man. It brings its votary from the chill periphery of things to the radiant core. It makes him for the moment one with truth. Not through mere perversity do men run after it. To the poor and the unlettered it stands in the place of symphony concerts and of literature; and it is part of the deeper mystery and tragedy of life that whiffs and gleams of something that we immediately recognize as excellent should be vouchsafed to so many of us only in the fleeting earlier phases of what in its totality is so degrading a poisoning. The

drunken consciousness is one bit of the mystic consciousness, and our total opinion of it must find its place in our opinion of that larger whole.

Nitrous oxide and ether, especially nitrous oxide, when sufficiently diluted with air, stimulate the mystical consciousness in an extraordinary degree. Depth beyond depth of truth seems revealed to the inhaler. This truth fades out, however, or escapes, at the moment of coming to; and if any words remain over in which it seemed to clothe itself, they prove to be the veriest nonsense. Nevertheless, the sense of a profound meaning having been there persists; and I know more than one person who is persuaded that in the nitrous oxide trance we have a genuine metaphysical revelation.

Some years ago I myself made some observations on this aspect of nitrous oxide intoxication, and reported them in print. One conclusion was forced upon my mind at that time, and my impression of its truth has ever since remained unshaken. It is that our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus,

and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation. No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded. How to regard them is the question,—for they are so discontinuous with ordinary consciousness. Yet they may determine attitudes though they cannot furnish formulas, and open a region though they fail to give a map. At any rate, they forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality. Looking back on my own experiences, they all converge towards a kind of insight to which I cannot help ascribing some metaphysical significance. The keynote of it is invariably a reconciliation. It is as if the opposites of the world, whose contradictoriness and conflict make all our difficulties and troubles, were melted into unity. Not only do they, as contrasted species, belong to one and the same genus, but *one of the species*, the nobler and better one, *is itself the genus, and so soaks up and absorbs its opposite into itself.* This is a dark saying, I know, when thus expressed in terms of common logic, but I cannot wholly escape from its authority. I feel as if it must mean something, something like what the Hegelian philosophy means, if one could only lay hold of it more clearly. Those who

have ears to hear, let them hear; to me the living sense of its reality only comes in the artificial mystic state of mind.

I just now spoke of friends who believe in the anæsthetic revelation. For them too it is a monistic insight, in which the *other* in its various forms appears absorbed into the One. “Into this pervading genius,” writes one of them, “we pass, forgetting and forgotten, and thenceforth each is all, in God. There is no higher, no deeper, no other, than the life in which we are founded. ‘The One remains, the many change and pass;’ and each and every one of us is the One that remains. . . . This is the ultimatum. . . . As sure as being—whence is all our care—so sure is content, beyond duplexity, antithesis, or trouble, where I have triumphed in a solitude that God is not above.” This has the genuine religious mystic ring! . . .

In India, training in mystical insight has been known from time immemorial under the name of yoga. Yoga means the experimental union of the individual with the divine. It is based on persevering exercise; and the diet, posture, breathing, intellectual concentration, and moral discipline vary slightly in the different systems which teach it. The yogi, or disciple, who has by these means overcome the obscurations of his lower nature sufficiently, enters into the condition termed *samâdhi*, “and comes face to face

with facts which no instinct or reason can ever know.” He learns—

That the mind itself has a higher state of existence, beyond reason, a superconscious state, and that when the mind gets to that higher state, then this knowledge beyond reasoning comes. . . . All the different steps in yoga are intended to bring us scientifically to the superconscious state or *samâdhi*. . . . Just as unconscious work is beneath consciousness, so there is another work which is above consciousness, and which, also, is not accompanied with the feeling of egoism. . . . There is no feeling of *I*, and yet the mind works, desireless, free from restlessness, objectless, bodiless. Then the Truth shines in its full effulgence, and we know ourselves—for *Samâdhi* lies potential in us all—for what we truly are, free, immortal, omnipotent, loosed from the finite, and its contrasts of good and evil altogether, and identical with the *Atman* or Universal Soul.

The Vedantists say that one may stumble into superconsciousness sporadically, without the previous discipline, but it is then impure. Their test of its purity, like our test of religion’s value, is empirical: its fruits must be good for life. When a man comes out of *Samâdhi*, they assure us that he remains “enlightened, a sage, a prophet, a saint, his whole character changed, his life changed, illumined.”

The Buddhists use the word “samâdhi” as well as the Hindus; but “dhyâna” is their special word for higher states of contemplation. There seem to be four stages recognized in dhyâna. The first stage comes through concentration of the mind upon one point. It excludes desire, but not discernment or judgment: it is still intellectual. In the second stage the intellectual functions drop off, and the satisfied sense of unity remains. In the third stage the satisfaction departs, and indifference begins, along with memory and self-consciousness. In the fourth stage the indifference, memory, and self-consciousness are perfected. [Just what “memory” and “self-consciousness” mean in this connection is doubtful. They cannot be the faculties familiar to us in the lower life.] Higher stages still of contemplation are mentioned—a region where there exists nothing, and where the meditator says: “There exists absolutely nothing,” and stops. Then he reaches another region where he says: “There are neither ideas nor absence of ideas,” and stops again. Then another region where, “having reached the end of both idea and perception, he stops finally.” This would seem to be, not yet Nirvâna, but as close an approach to it as this life affords.

In the Mohammedan world the Sufi sect and various dervish bodies are the possessors of the mystical tradition. The Sufis have existed in Persia from the

earliest times, and as their pantheism is so at variance with the hot and rigid monotheism of the Arab mind, it has been suggested that Sufism must have been inoculated into Islam by Hindu influences. We Christians know little of Sufism, for its secrets are disclosed only to those initiated. To give its existence a certain liveliness in your minds, I will quote a Moslem document, and pass away from the subject.

Al-Ghazzali, a Persian philosopher and theologian, who flourished in the eleventh century, and ranks as one of the greatest doctors of the Moslem church, has left us one of the few auto-biographies to be found outside of Christian literature. Strange that a species of book so abundant among ourselves should be so little represented elsewhere—the absence of strictly personal confessions is the chief difficulty to the purely literary student who would like to become acquainted with the inwardness of religions other than the Christian.

M. Schmölders has translated a part of Al-Ghazzali's autobiography:

The Science of the Sufis [says the Moslem author] aims at detaching the heart from all that is not God, and at giving to it for sole occupation the meditation of the divine being. Theory being more easy for me than practice, I read [certain books] until I

understood all that can be learned by study and hear-say. Then I recognized that what pertains most exclusively to their method is just what no study can grasp, but only transport, ecstasy, and the transformation of the soul. How great, for example, is the difference between knowing the definitions of health, of satiety, with their causes and conditions, and being really healthy or filled. How different to know in what drunkenness consists,—as being a state occasioned by a vapor that rises from the stomach,—and being drunk effectively. Without doubt, the drunken man knows neither the definition of drunkenness nor what makes it interesting for science. Being drunk, he knows nothing; whilst the physician, although not drunk, knows well in what drunkenness consists, and what are its predisposing conditions. Similarly there is a difference between knowing the nature of abstinence, and being abstinent or having one's soul detached from the world.—Thus I had learned what words could teach of Sufism, but what was left could be learned neither by study nor through the ears, but solely by giving one's self up to ecstasy and leading a pious life.

Reflecting on my situation, I found myself tied down by a multitude of bonds—temptations on every side. Considering my teaching, I found it was impure before God. I saw myself struggling with all my might

to achieve glory and to spread my name. [Here follows an account of his six months' hesitation to break away from the conditions of his life at Bagdad, at the end of which he fell ill with a paralysis of the tongue.] Then, feeling my own weakness, and having entirely given up my own will, I repaired to God like a man in distress who has no more resources. He answered, as he answers the wretch who invokes him. My heart no longer felt any difficulty in renouncing glory, wealth, and my children. So I quitted Bagdad, and reserving from my fortune only what was indispensable for my subsistence, I distributed the rest. I went to Syria, where I remained about two years, with no other occupation than living in retreat and solitude, conquering my desires, combating my passions, training myself to purify my soul, to make my character perfect, to prepare my heart for meditating on God—all according to the methods of the Sufis, as I had read of them.

This retreat only increased my desire to live in solitude, and to complete the purification of my heart and fit it for meditation. But the vicissitudes of the times, the affairs of the family, the need of subsistence, changed in some respects my primitive resolve, and interfered with my plans for a purely solitary life. I had never yet found myself completely in ecstasy, save in a few single hours; nevertheless, I kept

the hope of attaining this state. Every time that the accidents led me astray, I sought to return; and in this situation I spent ten years. During this solitary state things were revealed to me which it is impossible either to describe or to point out. I recognized for certain that the Sufis are assuredly walking in the path of God. Both in their acts and in their inaction, whether internal or external, they are illumined by the light which proceeds from the prophetic source. The first condition for a Sufi is to purge his heart entirely of all that is not God. The next key of the contemplative life consists in the humble prayers which escape from the fervent soul, and in the meditations on God in which the heart is swallowed up entirely. But in reality this is only the beginning of the Sufi life, the end of Sufism being total absorption in God. The intuitions and all that precede are, so to speak, only the threshold for those who enter. From the beginning, revelations take place in so flagrant a shape that the Sufis see before them, whilst wide awake, the angels and the souls of the prophets. They hear their voices and obtain their favors. Then the transport rises from the perception of forms and figures to a degree which escapes all expression, and which no man may seek to give an account of without his words involving sin. . . .

This incommunicableness of the transport is the keynote of all mysticism. Mystical truth exists for the individual who has the transport, but for no one else. In this, as I have said, it resembles the knowledge given to us in sensations more than that given by conceptual thought. Thought, with its remoteness and abstractness, has often enough in the history of philosophy been contrasted unfavorably with sensation. It is a commonplace of metaphysics that God's knowledge cannot be discursive but must be intuitive, that is, must be constructed more after the pattern of what in ourselves is called immediate feeling, than after that of proposition and judgment. But *our* immediate feelings have no content but what the five senses supply; and we have seen and shall see again that mystics may emphatically deny that the senses play any part in the very highest type of knowledge which their transports yield. . . .

Mystical conditions may render the soul more energetic in the lines which their inspiration favors. But this could be reckoned an advantage only in case the inspiration were a true one. If the inspiration were erroneous, the energy would be all the more mistaken and misbegotten. So we stand once more before that problem of truth which confronted us at the end of the lectures on saintliness. You will remember that we

turned to mysticism precisely to get some light on truth. Do mystical states establish the truth of those theological affections in which the saintly life has its root?

In spite of their repudiation of articulate self-description, mystical states in general assert a pretty distinct theoretic drift. It is possible to give the outcome of the majority of them in terms that point in definite philosophical directions. One of these directions is optimism, and the other is monism. We pass into mystical states from out of ordinary consciousness as from a less into a more, as from a smallness into a vastness, and at the same time as from an unrest to a rest. We feel them as reconciling, unifying states. They appeal to the yes-function more than to the no-function in us. In them the unlimited absorbs the limits and peacefully closes the account. . . .

This overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute is the great mystic achievement. In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness. This is the everlasting and triumphant mystical tradition, hardly altered by differences of clime or creed. In Hinduism, in Neoplatonism, in Sufism, in Christian mysticism, in Whitmanism, we find the same recurring note, so that there is about mystical utterances an eternal unanimity which ought to make a critic stop and think, and which brings it about that

the mystical classics have, as has been said, neither birthday nor native land. Perpetually telling of the unity of man with God, their speech antedates languages, and they do not grow old.

“That art Thou!” say the Upanishads, and the Vedantists add: “Not a part, not a mode of That, but identically That, that absolute Spirit of the World.” . . .

In mystical literature such self-contradictory phrases as “dazzling obscurity,” “whispering silence,” “teeming desert,” are continually met with. They prove that not conceptual speech, but music rather, is the element through which we are best spoken to by mystical truth. Many mystical scriptures are indeed little more than musical compositions. . . . Music gives us ontological messages which non-musical criticism is unable to contradict, though it may laugh at our foolishness in minding them. There is a verge of the mind which these things haunt; and whispers therefrom mingle with the operations of our understanding, even as the waters of the infinite ocean send their waves to break among the pebbles that lie upon our shores. . . .

That doctrine, for example, that eternity is timeless, that our “immortality,” if we live in the eternal, is not so much future as already now and here, which we find so often expressed to-day in certain philosophic circles, finds its support in a “hear, hear!” or

an “amen,” which floats up from that mysteriously deeper level. We recognize the passwords to the mystical region as we hear them, but we cannot use them ourselves; it alone has the keeping of “the password primeval.”

I have now sketched with extreme brevity and insufficiency, but as fairly as I am able in the time allowed, the general traits of the mystic range of consciousness. *It is on the whole pantheistic and optimistic, or at least the opposite of pessimistic. It is anti-naturalistic, and harmonizes best with twice-bornness and so-called other-worldly states of mind.*

My next task is to inquire whether we can invoke it as authoritative. Does it furnish any *warrant for the truth* of the twice-bornness and supernaturality and pantheism which it favors? I must give my answer to this question as concisely as I can.

In brief my answer is this,—and I will divide it into three parts:—

- (1) Mystical states, when well developed, usually are, and have the right to be, absolutely authoritative over the individuals to whom they come.
- (2) No authority emanates from them which should make it a duty for those who stand outside of them to accept their revelations uncritically.

- (3) They break down the authority of the non-mystical or rationalistic consciousness, based upon the understanding and the senses alone. They show it to be only one kind of consciousness. They open out the possibility of other orders of truth, in which, so far as anything in us vitally responds to them, we may freely continue to have faith.

# 14

## “Human Immortality: Two Supposed Objections to the Doctrine” (1897)

### INTRODUCTION

“For my own part, then, so far as logic goes,” writes James in this reading, “I am willing that every leaf that ever grew in this world’s forests and rustled in the breeze should become immortal.”

Have you ever made, in heart or aloud, such a universally inclusive wish that all beings should live forever? “I speak, you see, from the point of view of all the other individual beings, realizing and enjoying inwardly their own existence.” Have you ever considered “the point of view of all the other individual beings” that share this world with you? If not, James bids you to try your best.

This essay, first a lecture, as many of James’s essays, was delivered in 1897 as part of Harvard’s Ingersoll Lectures, established by Caroline Haskell Ingersoll, in memory of her father, to pursue themes of immortality. James’s “Human Immortality: Two Sup-

*posed Objections to the Doctrine*" was the second lecture in this series, a series which continues today. With this tenderest essay, James aimed to "give to our belief in immortality a freer wing."

Of the two objections James considers, the first objection is metaphysical and the second, essentially, psychological and ethical. We have selected James's response to the second objection, a "narrow-hearted" objection, a "stumbling-block of altogether modern origin," which arises from our balking at the "the incredible and intolerable number of beings which, with our modern imagination, we must believe to be immortal, if immortality be true." The modern imagination strains to reconcile its expanding circle of moral concern ("cosmic emotion") with Darwinian deep time: "An immense compassion and kinship fill the heart. An immortality from which these inconceivable billions of fellow-strivers should be excluded becomes an irrational idea for us."

Ethically, an immortal ark must bear all beings of moral concern, but an ark with such all-inclusive cargo would quickly overfill and sink. The world cannot sustain such generosity.

*If any creature lives forever, why not all?—why not the patient brutes? So that a faith in immortality, if we are to indulge it, demands of us nowadays a scale*

*of representation so stupendous that our imagination faints before it, and our personal feelings refuse to rise up and face the task.*

*Often an ethical and psychological objection is more acute for us than a metaphysical one. For most of us, the problem of evil comes well before the ontological argument. “Are these puzzles worth anything?” we wonder. It may be that immortality is real, but is it a good thing? Not all philosophers think so. The moral philosopher Bernard Williams argued that immortality has negative value; a literally never-ending life would become, sooner or later, and then forever, a monotonous hell.*

*Whether ultimately true or false, we should be careful with our hopes, and clear about them. The pluralistic, multiversal, immortalist hope that James advances, regardless of its factual status, expands the circle of care to its logical limit: “The heart of being can have no exclusions akin to those which our poor little hearts set up.” Perhaps even every leaf is immortalized. That, at least, is the free-winged hope of William James. Perhaps nowhere else is James’s heart laid more open for inspection than here in “Human Immortality.”*



I proceed, during the remainder of the hour, to treat of my second point. . . .

My second point is relative to the incredible and intolerable number of beings which, with our modern imagination, we must believe to be immortal, if immortality be true. I cannot but suspect that this, too, is a stumbling-block to many of my present audience. And it is a stumbling-block which I should thoroughly like to clear away.

It is, I fancy, a stumbling-block of altogether modern origin, due to the strain upon the quantitative imagination which recent scientific theories, and the moral feelings consequent upon them, have brought in their train.

For our ancestors the world was a small, and—compared with our modern sense of it—a comparatively snug affair. Six thousand years at most it had lasted. In its history a few particular human heroes, kings, ecclesiarchs, and saints stood forth very prominent, overshadowing the imagination with their claims and merits, so that not only they, but all who were associated familiarly with them, shone with a glamour which even the Almighty, it was supposed, must recognize and respect. These prominent personages and their associates were the nucleus of the immortal group; the minor heroes and saints of minor sects came next, and people without distinction formed

a sort of background and filling in. The whole scene of eternity (so far, at least, as Heaven and not the nether place was concerned in it) never struck to the believer's fancy as an overwhelmingly large or inconveniently crowded stage. One might call this an aristocratic view of immortality; the immortals—I speak of Heaven exclusively, for an immortality of torment need not now concern us—were always an elite, a select and manageable number.

But, with our own generation, an entirely new quantitative imagination has swept over our western world. The theory of evolution now requires us to suppose a far vaster scale of times, spaces, and numbers than our forefathers ever dreamed the cosmic process to involve. Human history grows continuously out of animal history, and goes back possibly even to the tertiary epoch. From this there has emerged insensibly a democratic view, instead of the old aristocratic view, of immortality. For our minds, though in one sense they may have grown a little cynical, in another they have been made sympathetic by the evolutionary perspective. Bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh are these half-brutish prehistoric brothers. Girdled about with the immense darkness of this mysterious universe even as we are, they were born and died, suffered and struggled. Given over to fearful crime and passion, plunged in the blackest ignorance,

preyed upon by hideous and grotesque delusions, yet steadfastly serving the profoundest of ideals in their fixed faith that existence in any form is better than non-existence, they ever rescued triumphantly from the jaws of ever-imminent destruction the torch of life, which, thanks to them, now lights the world for us. How small indeed seem individual distinctions when we look back on these overwhelming numbers of human beings panting and straining under the pressure of that vital want! And how inessential in the eyes of God must be the small surplus of the individual's merit, swamped as it is in the vast ocean of the common merit of mankind, dumbly and undauntedly doing the fundamental duty and living the heroic life! We grow humble and reverent as we contemplate the prodigious spectacle. Not our differences and distinctions,—we feel—no, but our common animal essence of patience under suffering and enduring effort must be what redeems us in the Deity's sight. An immense compassion and kinship fill the heart. An immortality from which these inconceivable billions of fellow-strivers should be excluded becomes an irrational idea for us. That our superiority in personal refinement or in religious creed should constitute a difference between ourselves and our messmates at life's banquet, fit to entail such a consequential difference of destiny as eternal life for us, and for them torment hereafter,

or death with the beasts that perish, is a notion too absurd to be considered serious. Nay, more, the very beasts themselves—the wild ones at any rate—are leading the heroic life at all times. And a modern mind, expanded as some minds are by cosmic emotion, by the great evolutionist vision of universal continuity, hesitates to draw the line even at man. If any creature lives forever, why not all?—why not the patient brutes? So that a faith in immortality, if we are to indulge it, demands of us nowadays a scale of representation so stupendous that our imagination faints before it, and our personal feelings refuse to rise up and face the task. The supposition we are swept along to is too vast, and, rather than face the conclusion, we abandon the premise from which it starts. . . . Life is a good thing on a reasonably copious scale; but the very heavens themselves, and the cosmic times and spaces, would stand aghast, we think, at the notion of preserving eternally such an ever-swelling plethora and glut of it.

Having myself, as a recipient of modern scientific culture, gone through a subjective experience like this, I feel sure that it must also have been the experience of many, perhaps of most, of you who listen to my words. But I have also come to see that it harbors a tremendous fallacy; and, since the noting of the fallacy has set my own mind free again, I have felt that

one service I might render to my listeners tonight would be to point out where it lies.

It is the most obvious fallacy in the world, and the only wonder is that all the world should not see through it. It is the result of nothing but an invincible blindness from which we suffer, an insensibility to the inner significance of alien lives, and a conceit that would project our own incapacity into the vast cosmos, and measure the wants of the Absolute by our own puny needs. Our Christian ancestors dealt with the problem more easily than we do. We, indeed, lack sympathy: but they had a positive antipathy for these alien human creatures, and they naively supposed the Deity to have the antipathy, too. Being, as they were, "heathen," our forefathers felt a certain sort of joy in thinking that their Creator made them as so much mere fuel for the fires of hell. Our culture has humanized us beyond that point, but we cannot yet conceive them as our comrades in the fields of heaven. We have, as the phrase goes, no use for them, and it oppresses us to think of their survival. . . .

But is not such an attitude due to the veriest lack and dearth of your imagination? You take these swarms of alien kinsmen as they are for you: an external picture painted on your retina, representing a crowd oppressive by its vastness and confusion. As they are for you, so you think they positively and absolutely

are. I feel no call for them, you say; therefore there is no call for them. But all the while, beyond this externality which is your way of realizing them, they realize themselves with the acutest internality, with the most violent thrills of life. 'Tis you who are dead, stone-dead and blind and senseless, in your way of looking on. You open your eyes upon a scene of which you miss the whole significance. Each of these grotesque or even repulsive aliens is animated by an inner joy of living as hot or hotter than that which you feel beating in your private breast. The sun rises and beauty beams to light his path. To miss the inner joy of him, as Stevenson says, is to miss the whole of him. Not a being of the countless throng is there whose continued life is not called for, and called for intensely, by the consciousness that animates the being's form. That you neither realize nor understand nor call for it, that you have no use for it, is an absolutely irrelevant circumstance. That you have a saturation-point of interest tells us nothing of the interests that absolutely are. The Universe, with every living entity which her resources create, creates at the same time a call for that entity, and an appetite for its continuance,—creates it, if nowhere else, at least within the heart of the entity itself. It is absurd to suppose, simply because our private power of sympathetic vibration with other lives gives out so soon, that in the heart of

infinite being itself there can be such a thing as plethora, or glut, or supersaturation. It is not as if there were a bounded room where the minds in possession had to move up or make place and crowd together to accommodate new occupants. Each new mind brings its own edition of the universe of space along with it, its own room to inhabit; and these spaces never crowd each other,—the space of my imagination, for example, in no way interferes with yours. The amount of possible consciousness seems to be governed by no law analogous to that of the so-called conservation of energy in the material world. When one man wakes up, or one is born, another does not have to go to sleep, or die, in order to keep the consciousness of the universe a constant quantity. . . .

There seems no formal limit to the positive increase of being in spiritual respects; and since spiritual being, whenever it comes, affirms itself, expands and craves continuance, we may justly and literally say, regardless of the defects of our own private sympathy, that the supply of individual life in the universe can never possibly, however immeasurable it may become, exceed the demand. The demand for that supply is there the moment the supply itself comes into being, for the beings supplied demand their own continuance.

I speak, you see, from the point of view of all the other individual beings, realizing and enjoying

inwardly their own existence. If we are pantheists, we can stop there. We need, then, only say that through them, as through so many diversified channels of expression, the eternal Spirit of the Universe affirms and realizes its own infinite life. But if we are theists, we can go farther without altering the result. God, we can then say, has so inexhaustible a capacity for love that his call and need is for a literally endless accumulation of created lives. He can never faint or grow weary, as we should, under the increasing supply. His scale is infinite in all things. His sympathy can never know satiety or glut.

I hope now that you agree with me that the tiresomeness of an over-peopled Heaven is a purely subjective and illusory notion, a sign of human incapacity, a remnant of the old narrow-hearted aristocratic creed. “Revere the Maker, lift thine eye up to his style and manners of the sky,” and you will believe that this is indeed a democratic universe, in which your paltry exclusions play no regulative part? Was your taste consulted in the peopling of this globe? How, then, should it be consulted as to the peopling of the vast City of God? . . .

For my own part, then, so far as logic goes, I am willing that every leaf that ever grew in this world’s forests and rustled in the breeze should become immortal. It is purely a question of fact: are the leaves

so, or not? Abstract quantity, and the abstract needlessness in our eyes of so much reduplication of things so much alike, have no connection with the subject. For bigness and number and generic similarity are only manners of our finite way of thinking; and, considered in itself and apart from our imagination, one scale of dimensions and of numbers for the Universe is no more miraculous or inconceivable than another, the moment you grant to a universe the liberty to be at all, in place of the Non-entity that might conceivably have reigned.

The heart of being can have no exclusions akin to those which our poor little hearts set up. The inner significance of other lives exceeds all our powers of sympathy and insight. If we feel a significance in our own life which would lead us spontaneously to claim its perpetuity, let us be at least tolerant of like claims made by other lives, however numerous, however unideal they may seem to us to be. Let us at any rate not decide adversely on our own claim, whose grounds we feel directly, because we cannot decide favorably on the alien claims, whose grounds we cannot feel at all. That would be letting blindness lay down the law to sight.

# 15

## “A Pluralistic Mystic” (1910)

### INTRODUCTION

*At the outset of this anthology, we promised fourteen selections, like the fourteen doors of James’s summer house in Chocorua, which would grant entry into James’s writings and philosophy. But as his godfather, Ralph Waldo Emerson, once said, “a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.” James tended to agree and eschewed artificial constraints of all kinds: so here is the fifteenth and final selection. Appropriately, it is about the “more” of reality, the fact that any description of the cosmos is provisional; more is always left to be said. This is not a cause for frustration, but rather hope that another inning of the world is about to begin.*

*Over the years we have known many authors who work into their dying days. One thing strikes us clearly: those who write in the immediate face of death tend to do so like their lives depend on it. This is not to say that they choose the most important topics, in any ob-*

*jective sense, but rather that they tend to choose topics which are vitally important in the context of their own fleeting lives. Twilight writing has a certain revelatory power. It can show a reader what has always been, or is most forcefully, on an author's mind. And so we offer you one of James's last jottings, his final published piece, a review of Benjamin Blood's philosophy entitled "The Pluralistic Mystic."*

*Typically, the final selection to an anthology is meant to provide a conclusion and a sense of closure. Editors try to wrap things up tidily. You have reached the end and now, thanks to William James, you are no longer afraid of life. Well, not exactly. There is a very old saying about philosophy, brought up to date by James's friend, the mathematician-philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, that philosophy begins in wonder, and after philosophy runs its course, the wonder remains. James's early reading of Blood drew him to a similar conclusion. Philosophy could only go so far in explaining the mystery of life and reality—and this is ultimately for the best. In the end, the response to the universe in its complexity may not be a white-knuckled attempt to grasp it fully, but a willingness to experience its utter perplexity. At the end of James's life, this is what drew him back to Blood's thinking.*

*Blood was a wild man. He wrote wildly and beautifully and James loved him for it. In this final re-*

*view, he quotes Blood at length because he couldn't say it better himself:*

*Not unfortunately the universe is wild—game flavored as a hawk's wing. Nature is miracle all. She knows no laws; the same returns not, save to bring the different. The slow round of the engraver's lathe gains but the breadth of a hair, but the difference is distributed back over the whole curve, never an instant true—ever not quite.*

*Reality always outstrips our attempts to explain it. There is no traditional conclusion that we could fashion for this topic. Perhaps this comes as a disappointment to you. We would gently suggest that it shouldn't. "Not unfortunately the universe is wild." Not unfortunately. Not unfortunately. The open-endedness and multiplicity of the cosmos, James believed, is the site of wonder, but also hope. Maybe my life can make a difference. Maybe. Maybe.*

*This is not to say that hope will not occasionally falter. Blood and James conversed about suicide regularly, and it was to Blood that James admitted, "Fear of life in one form or other is the great thing to exorcise; but it isn't reason that will ever do it. Impulse without reason is enough, and reason without impulse is a poor makeshift. I take it that no man is educated who has never dallied with the thought of suicide."*

*James more than dallied. His writings were geared to save a life—his life. But more importantly, they prepared him to be just a little less afraid, to have the courage to live just a little more fully.*



Not for the ignoble vulgar do I write this article, but only for those dialectic-mystic souls who have an irresistible taste, acquired or native, for higher flights of metaphysics. I have always held the opinion that one of the first duties of a good reader is to summon other readers to the enjoyment of any unknown author of rare quality whom he may discover in his explorations. Now for years my own taste, literary as well as philosophic, has been exquisitely titillated by a writer the name of whom I think must be unknown to the readers of this article; so I no longer continue silent about the merits of Benjamin Paul Blood.

Mr. Blood inhabits a city otherwise, I imagine, quite unvisited by the Muses, the town called Amsterdam, situated on the New York Central Railroad. What his regular or bread-winning occupation may be I know not, but it can't have made him super-wealthy. He is an author only when the fit strikes him, and for short spurts at a time; shy, moreover, to the point of publishing his compositions only as

private tracts, or in letters to such far-from-reverberant organs of publicity as the *Gazette* or the *Recorder* of his native Amsterdam, or the *Utica Herald* or the *Albany Times*. Odd places for such subtle efforts to appear in, but creditable to American editors in these degenerate days! Once, indeed, the lamented W. T. Harris of the old *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* got wind of these epistles, and the result was a revision of some of them for that review (*Philosophic Reveries*, 1889). Also a couple of poems were reprinted from their leaflets by the editor of *Scribner's Magazine* ("The Lion of the Nile," 1888, and "Nemesis," 1899). But apart from these three dashes before the footlights, Mr. Blood has kept behind the curtain all his days.

The author's maiden adventure was the *Anæsthetic Revelation*, a pamphlet printed privately at Amsterdam in 1874. I forget how it fell into my hands, but it fascinated me so "weirdly" that I am conscious of its having been one of the stepping-stones of my thinking ever since.

It gives the essence of Blood's philosophy, and shows most of the features of his talent—albeit one finds in it little humor and no verse. It is full of verbal felicity, felicity sometimes of precision, sometimes of metaphoric reach; it begins with dialectic reasoning, of an extremely Fichtean and Hegelian type,

but it ends in a trumpet-blast of oracular mysticism, straight from the insight wrought by anaesthetics—of all things in the world—and unlike anything one ever heard before. The practically unanimous tradition of “regular” mysticism has been unquestionably *monistic*; and inasmuch as it is the characteristic of mystics to speak, not as the scribes, but as men who have “been there” and seen with their own eyes, I think that this sovereign manner must have made some other pluralistic-minded students hesitate, as I confess that it has often given pause to me. One cannot criticise the vision of a mystic—one can but pass it by, or else accept it as having some amount of evidential weight. I felt unable to do either with a good conscience until I met with Mr. Blood. His mysticism, which may, if one likes, be understood as monistic in this earlier utterance, develops in the later ones a sort of “left-wing” voice of defiance, and breaks into what to my ear has a radically pluralistic sound. I confess that the existence of this novel brand of mysticism has made my cowering mood depart. I feel now as if my own pluralism were not without the kind of support which mystical corroboration may confer. Morrison can no longer claim to be the only beneficiary of whatever right mysticism may possess to lend *prestige*.

This is my philosophic, as distinguished from my literary, interest, in introducing Mr. Blood to this

more fashionable audience: his philosophy, however mystical, is in the last resort not dissimilar from my own. I must treat him by “extracting” him, and simplify—certainly all too violently—as I extract. He is not consecutive as a writer, aphoristic and oracular rather; and being moreover sometimes dialectic, sometimes poetic, and sometimes mystic in his manner; sometimes monistic and sometimes pluralistic in his matter, I have to run my own risk in making him orate *pro domo mea*, and I am not quite unprepared to hear him say, in case he ever reads these pages, that I have entirely missed his point. No matter; I will proceed.

## I.

I will separate his diverse phases and take him first as a pure dialectician. Dialectic thought of the Hegelian type is a whirlpool into which some persons are sucked out of the stream which the straightforward understanding follows. Once in the eddy, nothing but rotary motion can go on. All who have been in it know the feel of its swirl—they know thenceforward that thinking unreturning on itself is but one part of reason, and that rectilinear mentality, in philosophy at any rate, will never do. Though each one may report in different words of his rotational expe-

rience, the experience itself is almost childishly simple, and whosoever has been there instantly recognizes other authentic reports. To have been in that eddy is a freemasonry of which the common password is a “fie” on all the operations of the simple popular understanding.

In Hegel’s mind the vortex was at its liveliest, and any one who has dipped into Hegel will recognize Mr. Blood to be of the same tribe.

“That Hegel was pervaded by the great truth,” Blood writes, “cannot be doubted. The eyes of philosophy, if not set directly on him, are set towards the region which he occupied. Though he may not be the final philosopher, yet pull him out, and all the rest will be drawn into his vacancy.”

Drawn into the same whirlpool, Mr. Blood means. Non-dialectic thought takes facts as singly given, and accounts for one fact by another. But when we think of “*all* fact,” we see that nothing of the nature of fact can explain it, “for that were but one more added to the list of things to be accounted for. . . . The beginning of curiosity, in the philosophic sense,” Mr. Blood again writes, “is the stare of being at itself, in the wonder why anything is at all, and what this being signifies. Naturally we first assume the void, and then wonder how, with no ground and no fertility, anything

should come into it.” We treat it as a positive nihilism, “a barrier from which all our batted balls of being rebound.”

Upon this idea Mr. Blood passes the usual transcendentalist criticism. There *is* no such separate opposite to being; yet we never think of being as such—of pure being as distinguished from specific forms of being—save as what stands relieved against this imaginary background.

Being has no *outline* but that which non-being makes, and the two ideas form an inseparable pair. “Each limits and defines the other. Either would be the other in the same position, for here (where there is as yet no question of content, but only of being itself) the position is all and the content is nothing. Hence arose that paradox: ‘Being is by nothing more real than not-being.’”

Popularly [Mr. Blood goes on] we think of all that is as having got the better of non-being. If all were not—that, we think, were easy: there were no wonder then, no tax on ingenuity, nothing to be accounted for. This conclusion is from the thinking which assumes all reality as immediately given assumes knowledge as a simple physical light, rather than as a distinction involving light and darkness equally. We assume that if the light were to go out, the show

would be ended (and so it would); but we forget that if the darkness were to go out, that would be equally calamitous. It were bad enough if the master had lost his crayon, but the loss of the blackboard would be just as fatal to the demonstration. Without darkness light would be useless—universal light as blind as universal darkness. Universal thing and universal nothing were indistinguishable. Why, then, assume the positive, the immediately affirmative, as alone the ingenious? Is not the mould as shapely as the model? The original ingenuity does not show in bringing light out of darkness, nor in bringing things out of nothing, but in evolving, through the just opposition of light and darkness, this wondrous picture, in which the black and white lines have equal significance—in evolving from life and death at once, the conscious spirit. . . .

It is our habit to think of life as dear, and of death as cheap (though Tithonus found them otherwise), or, continuing the simile of the picture, that paper is cheap while drawing is expensive; but the engraver had a different estimation in one sense, for all his labor was spent on the white ground, while he left untouched those parts of the block which make the lines in the picture. If being and non-being are both necessary to the presence of either, neither shall claim priority or preference. Indeed, we may fancy

an intelligence which, instead of regarding things as simply owning entity, should regard chiefly their background as affected by the holes which things are making in it. Even so, the paper-maker might see your picture as intrusive!

Thus “does the negation of being appear as indispensable in the making of it.” But to anyone who should appeal to particular forms of being to refute this paradox, Mr. Blood admits that:

To say that a picture, or any other sensuous thing, is the same as the want of it, were to utter nonsense indeed: there is a difference equivalent to the whole stuff and merit of the picture; but in so far as the picture can be there for thought, as something either asserted or negated, its presence or its absence are the same and indifferent. By *its* absence we do not mean the absence of anything else, nor absence in general; and how, forsooth, does its absence differ from these other absences, save by containing a complete description of the picture? The hole is as round as the plug; and from our thought the “picture” cannot get away. The negation is specific and descriptive, and what it destroys it preserves for our conception.

The result is that, whether it be taken generally or taken specifically, all that which *either is or is not is or is not by distinction or opposition*.

And observe the life, the process, through which this slippery doubleness endures. Let us suppose the present tense, that gods and men and angels and devils march all abreast in this present instant, and the only real time and date in the universe is now. And what is this instant now? Whatever else, it is *process*—becoming and departing; with what between? Simply division, difference; the present has no breadth for if it had, that which we seek would be the middle of that breadth. There is no precipitate, as on a stationary platform, of the process of becoming, no residuum of the process of departing, but between the two is a curtain, *the apparition of difference*, which is all the world.

I am using my scissors somewhat at random on my author's paragraphs, since one place is as good as another for entering a ring by, and the expert reader will discern at once the authentic dialectic circling.

Other paragraphs show Mr. Blood as more Hegelian still, and thoroughly idealistic:—

Assume that knowing is distinguishing, and that distinction is of difference; if one knows a difference, one knows it as of entities which afford it, and which also he knows; and he must know the entities and the difference apart,—one from the other. Knowing all this, he should be able to answer the twin question, “What is the difference *between sameness and difference?*”

It is a “twin” question, because the two terms are equal in the proposition, and each is full of the other. . . .

Sameness has “all the difference in the world”—from difference; and difference is an entity as difference—it being identically that. They are alike and different at once, since either is the other when the observer would contrast it with the other; so that the sameness and the difference are “subjective,” are the property of the observer: his is the “limit” in their unlimited field. . . .

We are thus apprized that distinction involves and carries its own identity; and that ultimate distinction—distinction in the last analysis—is self-distinction, “self-knowledge,” as we realize it consciously every day. Knowledge is self-referred: to know is to know that you know, and to be known as well.

“Ah! but *both in the same time?*” inquires the logician. A subject-object knowing itself as a seamless unit, while yet its two items show a real distinction: this passes all understanding.

But the whole of idealism goes to the proof that the two sides *cannot* succeed one another in a time-process. “To say you know, and you know that you know, is to add nothing in the last clause; it is as idle as to say that you lie, and you know that you lie,” for if you know it not you lie not.

Philosophy seeks to grasp totality,

but the power of grasping or consenting to totality involves the power of thought to make itself its own object. Totality itself may indeed be taken by the naïve intellect as an immediate topic, in the sense of being just an *object*, but it cannot be just that; for the knower, as other or opposite, would still be within that totality. The ‘universe’ by definition must contain all opposition. If distinction should vanish, what would remain? To what other could it change as a whole? How can the loss of distinction make a *difference*? Any loss, at its utmost, offers a new status with the old, but obviously it is too late now to efface distinction by a *change*. There is no possible conjecture, but such as carries with it the subjective that holds it; and when the conjecture is of distinction in general, the subjective fills the void with distinction of itself. The ultimate, ineffaceable distinction is self-distinction, self-consciousness. . . . “Thou art the unanswered question, couldst see thy proper eye.” . . . The thought that must be is the very thought of our experience; the ultimate opposition, the to be and not to be, is personality, spirit—somewhat that is in knowing that it is, and is nothing else but this knowing in its vast relations.

Here lies the bed-rock; here the brain-sweat of twenty-five centuries crystallizes to a jewel five words

long: “The Universe has No Opposite.” For there the wonder of that which is, rests safe in the perception that all things *are* only through the opposition which is their only fear.

“The inevitable generally,” in short, is exactly and identically that which in point of fact is actually here.

This is the familiar nineteenth-century development of Kant’s idealistic vision. To me it sounds monistic enough to charm the monist in me unreservedly. I listen to the felicitously-worded concept-music circling round itself, as on some drowsy summer noon one listens under the pines to the murmuring of leaves and insects, and with as little thought of criticism.

But Mr. Blood strikes a still more vibrant note:

No more can be than rationally is; and this was always true. There is no reason for what is not; but for what there is reason, that is and ever was. Especially is there no becoming of reason, and hence no reason for becoming, to a sufficient intelligence. In the sufficient intelligence all things always are, and are rational. To say there is something yet to be which never was, not even in the sufficient intelligence wherein the world is rational and not a blind and orphan waif, is to ignore all reason. Aught that might be assumed as contingently coming to be could only have “freedom”

for its origin; and “freedom” has not fertility or invention, and is not a reason for any special thing, but the very vacuity of a ground for anything in preference to its room. Neither is there in bare time any principle or originality where anything should come or go. . . .

Such idealism enures greatly to the dignity and repose of man. No blind fate, prior to what is, shall necessitate that all first be and afterward be known, but knowledge is first, with fate in her own hands. When we are depressed by the weight and immensity of the immediate, we find in idealism a wondrous consolation. The alien positive, so vast and overwhelming by itself, reduces its pretensions when the whole negative confronts it on our side. It matters little for its greatness when an equal greatness is opposed. When one remembers that the balance and motion of the planets are so delicate that the momentary scowl of an eclipse may fill the heavens with tempest, and even affect the very bowels of the earth—when we see a balloon, that carries perhaps a thousand pounds, leap up a hundred feet at the discharge of a sheet of note paper—or feel it stand deathly still in a hurricane, because it goes with the hurricane, sides with it, and ignores the rushing world below—we should realize that one titile of pure originality would outweigh this crass objective, and turn

these vast masses into mere breath and tissue-paper show.

But whose is the originality? There is nothing in what I am treating as this phase of our author's thought to separate it from the old-fashioned rationalism. There must be a reason for every fact; and so much reason, so fact. The reason is always the whole foil and background and negation of the fact, the whole remainder of reality.

A man may feel good only by feeling better. . . . Pleasure is ever in the company and contrast of pain; for instance, in thirsting and drinking, the pleasure of the one is the exact measure of the pain of the other, and they cease precisely together—otherwise the patient would drink more. The black and yellow gonfalon of Lucifer is indispensable in any spiritual picture.

Thus do truth's two components seem to balance, vibrating across the centre of indifference; “being and non-being have equal value and cost,” and “mainly are convertible in their terms.”

This sounds radically monistic; and monistic also is the first account of the Ether-revelation, in which we read that “thenceforth each is all, in God. . . . The One remains, the many change and pass; and every one of us is the One that remains.”

## II.

It seems to me that any transcendental idealist who reads this article ought to discern in the fragmentary utterances which I have quoted thus far, the note of what he considers the truer dialectic profundity. He ought to extend the glad hand of fellowship to Mr. Blood; and if he finds him afterwards palavering with the enemy, he ought to count him, not as a simple ignoramus or Philistine, but as a renegade and relapse. He cannot possibly be treated as one who sins because he never has known better, or as one who walks in darkness because he is congenitally blind.

Well, Mr. Blood, explain it as one may, does turn towards the darkness as if he had never seen the light. Just listen for a moment to such irrationalist deliverances on his part as these:—

Reason is neither the first nor the last word in this world. Reason is an equation; it gives but a pound for a pound. Nature is excess; she is evermore, without cost or explanation.

'Is heaven so poor that *justice*  
 Metes the bounty of the skies?  
 So poor that every blessing  
 Fills the debit of a cost?  
 That all process is returning?  
 And all gain is of the lost?'

Go back into reason, and you come at last to fact, nothing more—a given-ness, a something to wonder at and yet admit, like your own will. And all these tricks for logicizing originality, self-relation, absolute process, subjective contradiction, will wither in the breath of the mystical tact; they will swirl down the corridors before the besom of the everlasting Yea. . . .

Have we here contradiction simply, a man converted from one faith to its opposite? Or is it only dialectic circling, like the opposite points on the rim of a revolving disc, one moving up, one down, but replacing one another endlessly, while the whole disc never moves? If it be this latter—Mr. Blood himself uses the image—the dialectic is too pure for me to catch: a deeper man must mediate the monistic with the pluralistic Blood. Let my incapacity be castigated, if my “Subject” ever reads this article, but let me treat him from now onwards as the simply pluralistic mystic which my reading of the rest of him suggests. I confess to some dread of my own fate at his hands. In making so far an ordinary transcendental idealist of him, I have taken liberties, running separate sentences together, inverting their order, and even altering single words, for all which I beg pardon; but in treating my author from now onwards as a pluralist, interpre-

tation is easier, and my hands can be less stained (if they *are* stained) with exegetic blood.

I have spoken of his verbal felicity, and alluded to his poetry. Before passing to his mystic gospel, I will refresh the reader (doubtless now fatigued with so much dialectic) by a sample of his verse. “The Lion of the Nile” is an allegory of the “champion spirit of the world” in its various incarnations.

Thus it begins:—

“Whelped on the desert sands, and desert bred  
From dugs whose sustenance was blood alone—  
A life translated out of other lives,  
I grew the king of beasts; the hurricane  
Leaned like a feather on my royal fell;  
I took the Hyrcan tiger by the scruff  
And tore him piecemeal; my hot bowels laughed  
And my fangs yearned for prey. Earth was my lair:  
I slept on the red desert without fear:  
I roamed the jungle depths with less design  
Than e'en to lord their solitude; on crags  
That cringe from lightning—black and blasted fronts  
That crouch beneath the wind-bleared stars, I told  
My heart's fruition to the universe,  
And all night long, roaring my fierce defy,  
I thrilled the wilderness with aspen terrors,  
And challenged death and life. . . .”

Again:

“Naked I stood upon the raked arena  
Beneath the pennants of Vespasian,  
While seried thousands gazed—strangers from  
    Caucasus,  
Men of the Grecian Isles, and Barbary princes,  
To see me grapple with the counterpart  
Of that I had been—the raptorial jaws,  
The arms that wont to crush with strength alone,  
The eyes that glared vindictive.—Fallen there,  
Vast wings upheaved me; from the Alpine peaks  
Whose avalanches swirl the valley mists  
And whelm the helpless cottage, to the crown  
Of Chimborazo, on whose changeless jewels  
The torrid rays recoil, with ne’er a cloud  
To swathe their blistered steps, I rested not,  
But preyed on all that ventured from the earth,  
An outlaw of the heavens.—But evermore  
Must death release me to the jungle shades;  
And there like Samson’s grew my locks again  
In the old walks and ways, till scapeless fate  
Won me as ever to the haunts of men,  
Luring my lives with battle and with love. . . .”

I quote less than a quarter of the poem, of which the rest is just as good, and I ask: Who of us all handles his English vocabulary better than Mr. Blood? His

proclamations of the mystic insight have a similar verbal power:—

There is an invariable and reliable condition (or uncondition) ensuing about the instant of recall from anaesthetic stupor to “coming to,” in which the genius of being is revealed. . . . No words may express the imposing certainty of the patient that he is realizing the primordial Adamic surprise of Life.

Repetition of the experience finds it ever the same, and as if it could not possibly be otherwise. The subject resumes his normal consciousness only to partially and fitfully remember its occurrence, and to try to formulate its baffling import,—with but this consolatory afterthought: that he has known the oldest truth, and that he has done with human theories as to the origin, meaning, or destiny of the race. He is beyond instruction in “spiritual things.” . . .

It is the instant contrast of this “tasteless water of souls” with formal thought as we “come to,” that leaves in the patient an astonishment that the awful mystery of Life is at last but a homely and a common thing, and that aside from mere formality the majestic and the absurd are of equal dignity. The astonishment is aggravated as at a thing of course, missed by sanity in overstepping, as in too foreign a search, or with too eager an attention: as in finding one’s

spectacles on one's nose, or in making in the dark a step higher than the stair. My first experiences of this revelation had many varieties of emotion; but as a man grows calm and determined by experience in general, so am I now not only firm and familiar in this once weird condition, but triumphant, divine. To minds of sanguine imagination there will be a sadness in the tenor of the mystery, as if the key-note of the universe were low; for no poetry, no emotion known to the normal sanity of man, can furnish a hint of its primeval prestige, and its all-but appalling solemnity; but for such as have felt sadly the instability of temporal things there is a comfort of serenity and ancient peace; while for the resolved and imperious spirit there are majesty and supremacy unspeakable. Nor can it be long until all who enter the anaesthetic condition (and there are hundreds every secular day) will be taught to expect this revelation, and will date from its experience their initiation into the Secret of Life. . . .

This has been my moral sustenance since I have known of it. In my first printed mention of it I declared: "The world is no more the alien terror that was taught me. Spurning the cloud-grimed and still sultry battlements whence so lately Jehovan thunders boomed, my gray gull lifts her wing against the night fall, and takes the dim leagues with a fearless eye."

And now, after twenty-seven years of this experience, the wing is grayer, but the eye is fearless still, while I renew and doubly emphasize that declaration. I know, as having known, the meaning of Existence; the sane centre of the universe—at once the wonder and the assurance of the soul.

After this rather literary interlude I return to Blood's philosophy again. I spoke a while ago of its being an "irrationalistic" philosophy in its latest phase. Behind every "fact" rationalism postulates its "reason." Blood parodizes this demand in true nominalistic fashion. "The goods are not enough, but they must have the invoice with them. There must be a *name*, something to *read*. I think of Dickens's horse that always fell down when they took him out of the shafts; or of the fellow who felt weak when naked, but strong in his overcoat." No bad mockery, this, surely, of rationalism's habit of explaining things by putting verbal doubles of them beneath them as their ground!

All that philosophy has sought as cause, or reason [he says] pluralism subsumes in the status and the given fact, where it stands as plausible as it may ever hope to stand. There may be disease in the presence of a question as well as in the lack of an answer. We do not wonder so strangely at an ingenious and well-set-up effect, for we feel such in ourselves; but a cause,

reaching out beyond the verge [of fact] and dangling its legs in nonentity, with the hope of a rational foothold, should realize a strenuous life. Pluralism believes in truth and reason, but only as mystically realized, as lived in experience. Up from the breast of a man, up to his tongue and brain, comes a free and strong determination, and he cries, originally, and in spite of his whole nature and environment, "I will." This is the Jovian fiat, the pure cause. This is reason; this or nothing shall explain the world for him. For how shall he entertain a reason bigger than himself? . . . Let a man stand fast, then, as an axis of the earth; the obsequious meridians will bow to him, and gracious latitudes will measure from his feet.

This seems to be Blood's mystical answer to his own monistic statement which I quoted above, that "freedom" has no fertility, and is no reason for any special thing. "Philosophy," Mr. Blood writes to me in a letter, "is past. It was the long endeavor to logicize what we can only realize practically or in immediate experience. I am more and more impressed that Heraclitus insists on the equation of reason and unreason, or chance, as well as of being and not-being, etc. This throws the secret beyond logic, and makes mysticism outclass philosophy. The insight that mystery,—the Mystery, as such is final, is the hymnic word. If

you use reason pragmatically, and deny it absolutely, you can't be beaten; be assured of that. But the *Fact* remains, and of course the Mystery."

The "Fact," as I understand the writer here to mean it, remains in its native disseminated shape. From every realized amount of fact some other fact is *absent*, as being uninvolved. "There is nowhere more of it consecutively, perhaps, than appears upon this present page." There is, indeed, to put it otherwise, no more one all-enveloping fact than there is one all-enveloping spire in an endlessly growing spiral, and no more one all-generating fact than there is one central point in which an endlessly converging spiral ends. Hegel's "bad infinite" belongs to the eddy as well as to the line.

"Progress?" writes our author.

And to what? Time turns a weary and a wistful face; has he not traversed an eternity? and shall another give the secret up? We have dreamed of a climax and a consummation, a final triumph where a world shall burn *en barbecue*; but there is not, cannot be, a purpose of eternity; it shall pay mainly as it goes, or not at all. The show is on; and what a show, if we will but give our attention! Barbecues, bonfires, and banners? Not twenty worlds a minute would keep up our bonfire of the sun; and what banners of our fancy

could eclipse the meteor pennants of the pole, or the opaline splendors of the everlasting ice? . . . Doubtless we are ostensibly progressing, but there have been prosperity and highjinks before. Nineveh and Tyre, Rome, Spain, and Venice also had their day. We are going, but it is a question of our standing the pace. It would seem that the news must become less interesting or tremendously more so—"a breath can make us, as a breath has made."

Elsewhere we read: "Variety, not uniformity, is more likely to be the key to progress. The genius of being is whimsical rather than consistent. Our strata show broken bones of histories all forgotten. How can it be otherwise? There can be no purpose of eternity. It is process all. The most sublime result, if it appeared as the ultimatum, would go stale in an hour; it could not be endured."

Of course from an intellectual point of view this way of thinking must be classed as scepticism. "Contingency forbids any inevitable history, and conclusions are absurd. Nothing in Hegel has kept the planet from being blown to pieces." Obviously the mystical "security," the "apodal sufficiency" yielded by the anaesthetic revelation, are very different moods of mind from aught that rationalism can claim to father—more active, prouder, more heroic. From his ether-intoxication Blood may feel towards ordinary

rationalists “as Clive felt towards those millions of Orientals in whom honor had no part.” . . . I quoted from his “Nemesis”—“Is heaven so poor that justice,” etc. The writer goes on, addressing the goddess of “compensation” or rational balance;—

“How shalt thou poise the courage  
That covets all things hard?  
How pay the love unmeasured  
That could not brook reward?  
How prompt self-loyal honour  
Supreme above desire,  
That bids the strong die for the weak,  
The martyr sing in fire?  
Why do I droop in bower  
And sigh in sacred hall?  
Why stifle under shelter?  
Yet where, through forest tall,  
The breath of hungry winter  
In stinging spray resolves,  
I sing to the north wind’s fury  
And shout with the coarse-haired wolves?

. . . . .

What of thy priests’ confuting  
Of fate and form and law—  
Of being and essence and counterpoise  
Of poles that drive and draw?

Ever some compensation,  
Some pandering purchase still!  
But the vehm of achieving reason  
Is the all-patrician Will!"

Mr. Blood must manage to re-write the last two lines; but the contrast of the two securities, his and the rationalist's, is plain enough. The rationalist sees safe conditions. But Mr. Blood's revelation, whatever the conditions be, helps him to stand ready for a life among them. In this, his attitude seems to resemble that of Nietzsche's *amor fati*!

"Simply," he writes to me, "*we do not know*. But when we say we do not know, we are not to say it weakly and meekly, but with confidence and content. . . . Knowledge is and must ever be *secondary*, a witness rather than a principal, or a 'principle'!—in the case. Therefore mysticism for me!"

"Reason," he prints elsewhere, "is but an item in the duplex potency of the mystery, and behind the proudest consciousness that ever reigned, Reason and Wonder blushed face to face. The legend sinks to burlesque if in that great argument which antedates man and his mutterings, Lucifer had not a fighting chance. . . .

It is given to the writer and to others for whom he is permitted to speak—and we are grateful that it is the custom of gentlemen to believe one another—that the

highest thought is not a milk-and-water equation of so much reason and so much result—‘no school sum to be cast up.’ We have realized the highest divine thought of itself, and there is in it as much of wonder as of certainty; inevitable, and solitary and safe in one sense, but queer and cactus-like no less in another sense, it appeals unutterably to experience alone.

There are sadness and disenchantment for the novice in these inferences, as if the keynote of the universe were low, but experience will approve them. Certainty is the root of despair. The inevitable stales, while doubt and hope are sisters. Not unfortunately the universe is wild—game flavored as a hawk’s wing. Nature is miracle all. She knows no laws; the same returns not, save to bring the different. The slow round of the engraver’s lathe gains but the breadth of a hair, but the difference is distributed back over the whole curve, never an instant true—ever not quite.

“Ever not quite”—this seems to wring the very last panting word out of rationalistic philosophy’s mouth. It is fit to be pluralism’s heraldic device. There is no complete generalization, no total point of view, no all-pervasive unity, but everywhere some residual resistance to verbalization, formulation, and discursification, some genius of reality that escapes from the pressure of the logical finger, that says “hands off,” and claims

its privacy, and means to be left to its own life. “We are the first that ever burst into this silent sea.” Philosophy must pass from words, that reproduce but ancient elements, to life itself, that gives the integrally new. The “inexplicable,” the “mystery,” as what the intellect, with its claim to reason out reality, thinks that it is in duty bound to resolve, and the resolution of which Blood’s revelation would eliminate from the sphere of our duties, remains; but it remains as something to be met and dealt with by faculties more akin to our activities and heroisms and willingnesses, than to our logical powers. This is the anesthetic insight, according to our author. Let *my* last word, then, speaking in the name of intellectual philosophy, be *his* word.—“There is no conclusion. What has concluded, that we might conclude in regard to it? There are no fortunes to be told, and there is no advice to be given.—Farewell!”

# Index

- the Absolute, 244, 265, 267, 275, 278–80, 322, 333  
Addams, Jane, 2  
Agassiz, Louis, 210  
alcohol, 311–12  
Al-Ghazzali, 303, 317–20  
Alline, Henry, 47–48  
anesthesia, 235–41, 312, 314, 359–60, 364, 368  
argument, principles of, 57  
Aristotle, 93  
asceticism, 224–26  
Atman, 315  
authority, 89
- Banville, John, 4–5, 7  
being, 345–48, 351–54  
belief(s): in God, 78–79, 84–86; inexplicability of, 88–91; justification of, 77–79, 87–88; passion in relation to, 83, 89, 91; practical effects of, 79, 103, 134–36, 138; psychological factors in, 88; purpose of, 130–31; religious, 103–9; as a rule for action, 270; testing of one's, 267, 280; in truth, 89–90; will in relation to, 79, 83–92. *See also* truth
- Berkeley, George, 273  
Blood, Benjamin, 235–41, 303, 339–68; *The Anesthetic Revelation and the Gist of Philosophy*, 16, 235, 237, 342; “The Lion of the Nile,” 342, 357–58; “Nemesis,” 342, 365–66; *Philosophic Reveries*, 342
- body: as component of the self, 187; the felt part of, 198; role of, in feeling of the spiritual self, 199–202, 206  
Bourget, Paul, 220  
Bowditch, Henry, 8  
brain, 168–72  
Brooks, Phillips, 153–54  
Brown University, 77  
Buddha, 43  
Buddhism, 316  
Bunyan, John, 45–47
- Cabot, Ella Lyman, 54  
Calvinism, 125  
Cambridge YMCA, 110  
Camus, Albert, 6, 110  
Carlyle, Thomas, 122, 259  
Carpenter, Edward, 231  
Cellini, Benvenuto, 260  
certainty. *See* uncertainty  
Chaix, Jeanne, 220  
chance: determinism and indeterminism in regard to, 54, 61–62, 67–74; meaning of, 62–63; objections to, 61–62, 64; as opportunity for exercising free will, 54–55, 111–12. *See also* choice  
Channing, William Ellery, 34  
Chapman, J. J., 291  
Chautauqua, New York, 141, 143–47  
choice: about the meaning of/in life, 12–13; avoidance of, as a choice in itself, 13, 92, 96–98, 104–5,

- choice (*continued*)  
 108–9; determinism and indeterminism in regard to, 54–55, 64–67; forced, 13; passion as factor in, 91–92; will and, 91–92.  
*See also* chance; free will; options; self: capacity of, for meaning and happiness in our lives
- Civil War, 19, 282, 284
- Clifford, William, 77–78, 87–88, 90, 98, 249–50
- clothes, 187–88
- consciousness: changing character of, 163–72; continuity of, 172–86; diverse forms of, 312–13, 325; existence of, as fundamental truth, 92; first step in studying, 162–63; James's theory of, 161–86; mystical, 302, 305, 315, 325; self in relation to, 174–76, 179, 195–207. *See also* stream of consciousness; thought
- conversion, 228
- courage, 5, 109, 133–35, 142, 341
- Cranch, C. P., 32
- Crichton-Browne, James, 310
- Darwin, Charles, 54, 327
- dead hypotheses. *See* live/dead hypotheses
- death, certainty of, 41–42
- depression, 10–11, 25–30. *See also* melancholy; soul-sickness
- Descartes, René, 93
- despair, 7, 10, 29, 42–44, 46, 209–10, 220–22
- determinism, 53–74; and chance, 61–62, 67–74; and choice, 64–67; defined and characterized, 53, 59; dilemma of, 70; freedom associated with, 58; free will vs., 53, 55–56; and the future, 59–60, 66–67; hard vs. soft, 58, 70; indeterminism vs., 59–61; moral danger of, 53–54, 69–70; nineteenth-century resurgence of, 54
- dhyâna (higher states of contemplation), 316
- dialectic, 344–57
- Dickinson, Lowes, 292
- drunkenness, 311–12
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 16, 101, 161, 250, 261, 266, 338
- empirical psychology, 1, 13
- empiricism: and consciousness, 161; and determinism, 53; and epistemology, 77–78, 92–96, 185; pragmatism compared to, 273–74, 278–81; and religion, 108, 278–81; and the self, 197, 206; tolerance as characteristic of, 108; and truth, 92–96, 108
- energies: ascetic practice as means of using, 224–26; capacities of, 209, 211–12, 216–17; components of, 210; expended on work, 208–15; ideas as means of unlocking, 226–31; qualitative vs. quantitative use of, 213–15; second wind as phenomenon of, 208, 210–12; sources or vehicles of, 209–10; stimulus to full use of, 217–24; training for maximum use of, 213; will as means of unlocking, 223. *See also* work
- epicureanism, 37, 43
- epistemology: certainty/objectivity in, 92–95; consciousness and, 185; empiricist approach to, 77–78, 92–96; perspectival conception of, 244, 262. *See also* truth
- evil: as component of happiness, 45; determinism and the existence of, 71; existential experience of,

- 50; as fact of life, 51–52; as fundamental, to the soul-sick, 36; healthy-minded individuals' refusal to see, 50–52; morality and the existence of, 71; as necessary for higher good, 37, 45, 52; practical attitude toward, 125–28  
 evolution, 330–32
- faith. *See* belief  
 family, as component of the self, 188  
 fate. *See* determinism  
 fear of life: as existential experience, 2, 12, 48–49; James's experience of, 2, 9, 11; perspectival approach to, 16; philosophy as guide to confronting, 1–3  
 fearthought, 229  
 feelings. *See* passion  
 Fichte, Johann Gottlieb, 342  
 Fletcher, Horace, 229  
 forced options, 13, 81–82, 99, 104  
 Frankl, Viktor, 55  
 free will: chance as opportunity for exercising, 54–55, 111–12; determinism vs., 53, 55–56; as forced choice, 13; James's notion of, 11–13, 27, 56–57; Providence compatible with, 71–73. *See also* choice; self  
 future: determinism and indeterminism in regard to, 59–60, 66–67; epistemological orientation toward, 95
- Gale, Richard M., 4  
 God/the divine: belief in, 78–79, 84–86; definition of the divine, 35; and immortality, 336; pragmatist approach to, 281; Tolstoy's turn to, 44; uncertainty surrounding, 31. *See also* Providence
- happiness, 30–31, 40, 42, 45  
 Harris, W. T., 342  
 Harvard University, 80, 111, 141–42, 326  
 healthy-mindedness, 6, 15, 50–51  
 Hedges, Chris, 20  
 Hegel, G.W.F., 93, 313, 342, 344–45, 349, 363, 364  
 Heine, Heinrich, 10  
 Helmholtz, Hermann von, 167  
 Heraclitus, 169, 362  
 heroism, 13–14, 16, 20, 132, 146, 148, 221, 286, 331–32  
 Hinton, Charles H., 93  
 Hodgson, Shadsworth, 164, 273  
 home, as component of the self, 188  
 honor, 191–92, 228  
 hope, 5, 22, 28, 31, 340  
 Hubbard, Elbert, 161  
 Hume, David, 84, 161, 183, 273  
 Huxley, Thomas, 54, 90  
 hypotheses, 81. *See also* live/dead hypotheses  
 Hyslop, Thomas, 230
- idealism, 350, 352–53, 355  
 ideals, as basis of meaning in life, 142, 152–55  
 ideas, as means of unlocking energy, 226–31  
 Ignatius Loyola, 224  
 immortality, 326–37  
 indeterminism, 54, 59  
 individualism, 242  
 Ingersoll, Caroline Haskell, 326  
 intellectualism (psychology), 184  
 intelligence, 155  
 interpersonal relations, 31–33, 101–2
- James, Alice, 7, 9  
 James, Garth "Wilkie," 19, 282

- James, Henry (brother), 9  
 James, Henry (father), 11, 301  
 James, Robertson (Bob), 19, 282  
 James, William, life: expedition to the Amazon Basin, 210; family, 9, 53; mental state, 2, 7–11, 26, 29, 33–34, 53, 110, 210; summer house, 7, 21–22  
 James, William, writings: “The Dilemma of Determinism,” 9, 14; “The Energies of Men,” 208; “Human Immortality: Two Supposed Objections to the Doctrine,” 326–27; “Is Life Worth Living?,” 12; “The Moral Equivalent of War,” 17, 20, 21, 282–83; “Mysticism,” 303; “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings,” 16, 242–43; “The Pluralistic Mystic,” 339; *The Principles of Psychology*, 13–14, 160–61; *Talk to Teachers*, 242; *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 35, 208, 301, 303; “What Makes a Life Significant,” 141; “What Pragmatism Means,” 17; “The Will to Believe,” 12–13, 77–79  
 Jefferies, Richard, 251–52  
 Jefferson, Thomas, 19–20  
*Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 221  
*Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 342  
 Kaag, John, *Sick Souls, Healthy Minds*, 3–4, 7–8  
 Kant, Immanuel, 93, 352  
 labor-question, 156–59  
 language, and metaphysics, 274–75  
 laughing gas. *See* nitrous oxide  
 Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm, 122  
 life: awakening from anesthesia as means of understanding, 236, 238–40, 359–61, 364; cosmic history of, 330–32; fleeting quality of, 26; happiness as component of, 30–31; hardships of, 21, 26, 51–52, 111, 127; immortality and, 326–37; perspectival approach to, 15–16, 21–22, 27–29, 242–49. *See also* fear of life; meaning of/in life; nature; wonder of life  
 live/dead hypotheses, 81–83, 86, 88–89, 97, 99, 100, 102, 106–7  
 living options, 81–82, 85, 104, 107  
 Locke, John, 165, 273  
 logic, 90–91  
 love, 191  
 Luther, Martin, 309  
 Marcus Aurelius, 121  
 material self, 187–89  
 maybes. *See* uncertainty  
 McKinley, William, 286  
 meaning of/in life: in the common, ordinary, and everyday, 27–29, 148–50, 251–59, 261–62; determinism as challenge to, 54; effort and struggle as measure of, 13–14, 127–28, 135, 137, 141–42, 146, 283; evil as component of, 51–52; existential questions concerning, 42, 110; fundamental sense of, 43–44, 137; human relations and history as site for finding, 32–33; ideals as basis of, 142, 152–55; the individual’s capacity for finding, 2, 10–14, 27, 30–31, 111–12, 134–36, 260–61; James’s

- philosophical approach to, 1–2, 4, 110–38; optimistic attitude toward, 113–14; perspectival approach to, 15–16, 42–43; pessimistic attitude toward, 114–17; religious belief as means to finding, 118–19; suspension of practicality as means to experiencing, 249–54, 258; Tolstoy's crisis over, 38–44; uncertainty surrounding, 30–31, 37, 38, 111–12, 132–34, 137; work as expression of, 26, 29, 33–34, 148–50; young adults' questioning of, 6; zest as key to experiencing, 142–43, 147, 249. *See also* courage; heroism; life
- melancholy: Alline's experience of, 47–48; alternation of mania with, 115; Bunyan's experience of, 45–47; excess as condition for, 127; experience of the world as source of, 122; philosophical reflection on, 118; as psychopathic state, 36, 38, 48–52; as religious disease, 122. *See also* depression; pessimism; soul-sickness
- Menand, Louis, 282
- metaphysics: of being, 345–48, 351–54; Blood's philosophy and, 339–68; and consciousness, 166, 205; fundamental questions of life, 27, 38, 237–38, 274–75; and immortality, 327–28; pragmatist approach to, 267–73; role of language in, 274–75; and the wonder and inexplicability of the cosmos, 339–40, 366–68. *See also* determinism
- Meysenbug, Malwida von, 303
- Mill, John Stuart, 219
- misery, 26
- momentous/trivial options, 82–83, 96–97, 104
- moral holidays, 267, 279–80
- morality: cultivation of virtues equivalent to those shaped by war, 291–98; determinism and, 53–54, 69–70; existence of evil as problem for, 71; scepticism about, 100–101; urgency of questions concerning, 99
- music, 323
- mysticism: achievement of, 322; Blood and, 343; conscious state associated with, 302, 305, 315, 325; features of, 301–2, 305–8; Henry James Sr.'s experience of, 301; intoxicated states taken for, 311–12; James's experience of, 304–5, 313; monistic, 343; music likened to, 323; non-Christian manifestations of, 314–20; and optimism, 322, 324; pluralistic, 343, 356; religion rooted in, 304; truth in relation to, 321–22; typical experiences of, 308–11; uniformity of experiences of, 322–23; yoga compared to, 314–15
- Nagel, Thomas, 303
- nature: experience of, as source of pessimism or scepticism of the divine, 119–25, 129–30; meaning of/in life to be found in, 261–62; religious attitude toward, 128–29; scientific approach to, 90, 97; spirit underlying/animating, 120–22, 124, 128–33, 136. *See also* life
- Nietzsche, Friedrich, 17, 18–19, 303, 366

- Nirvana, 239, 316  
nitrous oxide, 235–41, 303, 312  
nominalism, 275  
novelty, 155  
optimism, 37, 50, 113–14, 120, 322, 324  
options, 81–83. *See also* choice; forced options; living options; momentous/trivial options  
pacifism, 288, 291–92  
Pascal, Blaise, 34, 78, 84–86, 91, 98, 100  
passion: belief in relation to, 83, 89, 91; as component of choice, 91–92; in interpersonal relations, 101–2; in pursuit of truth, 96, 98–99; in science, 98, 100; value judgments based in, 244. *See also* will  
patriotism, 288, 294–95  
Patten, Simon, 290  
peace. *See* pacifism  
Peirce, Charles Sanders, 270–71  
perspective-taking: awakening from anesthesia as an exercise in, 235–41; as characteristic of healthy-mindedness, 15; epistemological, 244, 262; and ethical approach to immorality, 329–37; on life's hardships, 15–16, 21–22, 27–29; on others' ways of life, 242–49, 262, 333–36; seeing the meaning of/in life aided by, 15–16; by the suspension of practicality as means to experiencing the meaning of/in life, 249–54, 258  
pessimism: determinism and, 70; existential sense of, 48, 71, 114–18, 120, 135; as religious disease, 119–21; Schopenhauer and, 26, 36. *See also* melancholy  
Philippians, Epistle to, 11  
*Philosophical Review* (journal), 224  
philosophy: Blood's critique of, 235–36, 238, 241, 362–68; James's conception of, 273; principles of argument in, 57; value of, 1, 3, 5; and wonder, 339, 345–46  
Pilate, Pontius, 17  
pluralism, 60, 242–43, 343, 356, 361–62, 367  
positivism, 275  
possibilities: determinism and indeterminism in regard to, 59–61; Providence compatible with, 71–73  
poverty, 152, 153–54  
pragmatism: appeal to consequences as method of, 269–77; coining of the term, 270–71; compared to the philosophical tradition, 273–76; empiricism compared to, 273–74, 278–81; forerunners of, 273; James's conception of, 18, 265–66; origins of, 1, 270–71, 282; religion compatible with, 278–81; science likened to, 271–72, 274, 277; squirrel anecdote illustrating, 267–69; and truth, 266–67, 277, 282  
prayer, 230  
Prince, Morton, 221  
progress, 155, 363–64  
Providence, 71–73  
psychology. *See* consciousness; empirical psychology  
rationalism, 273–74, 276–77, 280–81, 354, 361, 364–67  
regret, 68–69  
religion: belief vs. scepticism concerning, 103–9; empiricism

- and, 108, 278–81; lack of evidence against believing in, 130, 137–38; melancholy resulting from disappointment in religion, 122; mystical experience as root of, 304; on nature's essence and meaning, 128–29; obstacles to belief in, 119–21; origin of, 35–38, 44, 50; personal aspect of, 106; pessimism as diseased attitude toward, 119–21; pragmatism compatible with, 278–81; principles of, 103–4; science and, 130, 137–38, 228–29; as solution to existential questions, 118–19; urgency of questions concerning, 105–6.
- See also* belief
- religious hypothesis, 103–6
- religious paradox, 9–11
- Renouvier, Charles Bernard, 11–13
- resignation, 127–28
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, 115
- Royce, Josiah, 9, 142, 250, 265
- Ruskin, John, 116–17
- samādhi (superconscious state), 315–16
- Sartre, Jean-Paul, 2
- scepticism: intellectual, 90, 92, 364; moral, 100–101; religious, 104–5, 107–8; in science, 97
- Schmölders, M., 317
- Schopenhauer, Arthur, 26, 36, 43, 259
- science: belief in, 90; passion in, 100; pragmatism likened to, 271–72, 274, 277; and religious belief, 130, 137–38, 228–29; suspension of judgment in, 96–98; truth in, 97–98; will in relation to, 86–87
- Scribner's Magazine*, 342
- second wind, 208, 210–12
- Secrétan, Charles, 104
- self: active element in consciousness as, 195–207; capacity of, for meaning and happiness in our lives, 2, 10–14, 27, 30–31, 111–12, 134–36, 260–61; components of, 162, 187; constraints on, 14–15; continuity of consciousness as, 174–76, 179; empirical, 186–87; the felt part of, 197–207; James's theory of, 160, 162, 186–207; material, 187–89; me vs. mine and, 186–87; social, 189–92; spiritual, 192–207. *See also* free will
- sensationalism (psychology), 183–84
- sensations, 162–63, 165–69
- Shakespeare, William, 112
- Shaw, Bernard, 231
- sick-souledness. *See* soul-sickness
- social self, 189–92
- Socrates, 273
- Solomon, 43
- soul-sickness: characteristics of, 2, 7; clinical cases of, 36–38; as existential experience, 2, 35; future possibilities seen from standpoint of, 36; healthy-mindedness compared to, 50; James's experience of, 2; and mysticism, 302–3; philosophy as therapy for, 5; religion originating from experiences of, 35–38, 44, 50; Tolstoy's experience of, 38–44; and twice-bornness, 5, 12, 208. *See also* depression; melancholy
- Spanish-American War, 19, 286
- spiritual self, 192–207
- squirrel anecdote, 267–69
- Steinmetz, S. R., 289

- Stephen, Fitz-James, 79–80, 108–9  
 Stephen, Leslie, 79  
 Stoics, 34, 37, 53  
 stream of consciousness, 160, 176–77, 181, 183, 185, 193, 195, 198, 204–5  
 suffering, 26  
 Sufism, 316–20  
 suicide: Blood's comments on, 340; Camus on existential question of, 110; Christian proscription of, 117; in contemporary United States, 6; at Harvard in James's day, 111; James's contemplation of, 26, 29, 340–41; mental states associated with, 9, 26, 29, 116, 118, 131; philosophical reflection on, 117–18, 126; resignation achieved by those considering, 127–28; Tolstoy's contemplation of, 39–40, 43–44  
 Swedenborg, Emanuel, 11, 301, 302  
 telepathy, 90  
 Tennyson, Alfred, Lord, 310  
 Teresa, Saint, 303  
 Thomson, James, 115–16, 126  
 Thoreau, Henry David, 16  
 thought, 194  
 Tolstoy, Leo, 38–45, 47, 149–50, 156, 292  
 transcendentalism, 16, 197, 205, 355  
 trivial options. *See* momentous/trivial options  
 truth: belief in relation to, 89–90; empiricist approach to, 92–96, 108; as goal and point of convergence, 266–67; James's theory of, 17–18, 266–67; mysticism in relation to, 321–22; pragmatist conception of, 266–67, 277, 282; in science, 97–98. *See also* belief; epistemology  
 twice-bornness, 5, 12, 45, 208, 324  
 uncertainty: determinism and indeterminism in regard to, 60–61; epistemology and, 92–95; about God, 31; about the meaning of/in life, 30–31, 37, 38, 111–12, 132–34, 137; about pressing questions of life, 78  
 University of California, 271  
 utilitarianism, 275  
 Wallace, David Foster, 242–43  
 war: civilizational benefits of, 19–20, 283, 286, 289–91, 294, 297; degeneracy and inferiority as bane of the spirit of, 20, 289, 290, 292; expense of, 285, 291; historical valorization of, 285–86; horrors of, 285–86, 291; ideological, 18–20; meaning-giving function of, 20, 283–85, 288–89; modern opinions about, 283–85, 287–91; moral equivalent of, 291–98  
 Ward, Thomas Wren, 25–27, 78, 162  
 Wells, H. G., 231  
 West, Cornel, 331–32  
 Whitehead, Alfred North, 339  
 Whitman, Walt, 113–15, 162, 253–59, 303  
 will: belief in relation to, 79, 83–92; and choice, 91–92; energies unlocked by acts of, 223; exercising of, 13–14; and the meaning of life, 14, 31, 111. *See also* free will; passion  
 Williams, Bernard, 328  
 Williams, John, 3–4  
 Wilson, Bill, 2

- women, energy expenditure of, 219–20  
wonder of life, 1, 5, 22, 27–28, 339–40, 345–46, 367  
Wordsworth, William, 135, 254  
work: contributions made to society through, 31–34; energy expended on, 208–15; inner vs. outer, 213–15; as means of expressing meaning in life, 26, 29, 33–34, 148–50; as moral equivalent of war for honing virtues, 283–84, 295–98; results of, as part of the self, 188–89.  
*See also* energies; labor-question  
Wright, Chauncey, 130  
Wyckoff, Walter, 150–51  
Yale University, 77  
yoga, 209, 224–26, 314–15  
Zeno, 183  
zest, as key to experiencing meaning in life, 142–43, 147, 249

